

桜庭一樹

Kazuki Sakuraba

GOTHICKS

「ゴシックエス」
II 夏から遠ざかる列車

角川ビーンズ文庫









石造りの莊厳な建物。

聖マルグリット大図書館には、
いつものように、
ひとりの、
謎めいた小さな少女が
座っている。



少女——ヴィクトリカ・ド・ブロワは、
誰もいなくなつた学園に、
たつた一人残されて長い夏を過ごす

——はずだつた。



ヴィクトリカ・ド・ブロワ
書物・甘いお菓子・フレルを愛する、
迷多き天才美少女。図書館塔最上階で膨大な書物を読む
のが日課。

久城一弥
横濱の島田ヨーリンヴール王国に留学してきた、心優しき
姫王子。姿勢で正義感に溢れた、革人一家の三男。

グレヴィール・ド・ブロワ
ヴィクトリカの異母兄で、地元警
察署警部。色男だが、普段はな
ぜかドリルのような奇怪な髪型をし
ている。

アブリル・ブロドリー
アメリカから学園に留学してきた怪談
好きな美少女。
冒険家サー・ブロドリーの孫娘。

CHARACTERS

セシル先生
一弥とヴィクトリカのクラス担任教
師。大きな丸眼鏡が印象的な童
販の女性。

イラスト 武田直向

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The princess cared for nothing but her pretty red flowers, like the sun, excepting a beautiful marble statue. It was the representation of a handsome boy, carved out of pure white stone, which had fallen to the bottom of the sea from a wreck.

She planted by the statue a rose-colored weeping willow.

The Little Mermaid, by Andersen.

Prologue

As it had for the past several centuries, summer had once again come to the vast campus of St. Marguerite Academy, pride of the kingdom of Sauville.

European summer, with its damp, bright sunlight.

The grass was a lush green, the fountain flowing slow and steady like a melting pillar of ice, the flowers in the flowerbeds in full bloom.

As the summer break began, all the students disappeared from the school's huge U-shaped building and the luxurious dormitories, spending their holidays in ways befitting the aristocracy—just having fun however they wanted.

The first day of summer vacation.

Dazzling sunlight poured down on the now-empty academy.

A squirrel scurried from the woods up to the gazebo.

In St. Marguerite's Grand Library, a majestic stone building located in a corner of the campus, sat, as always, a mysterious little girl.

Clothed in a luxurious dress of frills and laces, she was holding a book in her hand, pouting somewhat sullenly. Rosy cheeks. Deep green eyes, fair as jewels. Long golden hair that cascaded softly like a bundle of silk threads.

The girl—Victorique de Blois—was supposed to spend a long summer alone in the historic, empty school.

Because the girl didn't know how to stop the boy from leaving, didn't know what to say to make him stay. And so she was supposed to welcome the summer all by herself.

The year is 1924.

The Kingdom of Sauville, a small country in Western Europe bordered by France, Italy and Switzerland. If the port city facing the Gulf of Lyon was the entrance to its long and narrow territory, the foot of the Alps, bordering Switzerland, was the secret attic of the small but powerful little giant of Western Europe, where a secretive academy stood quietly.

A hot and quiet summer had arrived at the four-hundred-year old school.
The boy left the dormitory, running across the lush green lawns of the
garden.

To meet the golden girl.

“This is bad. I gotta see Victorique!”

Thus began the pair’s long summer break.

Chapter 1: The Pony Puzzle

A bright summer morning.

St. Marguerite Academy.

Up until yesterday, students in their uniforms filled the huge U-shaped school building's classrooms, teachers hurrying down the corridors, but this morning, the high-ceilinged hallways and the auditorium, with their stained-glass windows, were all deserted. Only traces of yesterday's clamor remained in the silence.

The first morning of the summer break.

Once it was time to leave, students came out of their respective dormitories, dressed in their most fashionable shirts, boots, fancy dresses, every face brimming with joy and anticipation as they pictured the long summer vacation that was about to begin.

Water sprinkling down the fountain glistened under the summer sunlight pouring down from the boundless blue sky. The students walked across the campus, dragging their heavy suitcases, and headed for the main gate of St. Marguerite Academy, every one of them talking about their plans.

These children of the aristocracy would be joining their families for a luxurious holiday. In a few minutes, all of them would crowd the small station, the only one in the village, and board the train.

Far away from the clamorous, joyful buzz, there was a boy sitting quietly in his room in the dormitory.

Kazuya Kujou.

Since earlier he had been at his mahogany desk, where textbooks and notebooks lay open, studying as he always did.

Yet he couldn't help but notice the jolly ruckus coming from outside the window.

Summer vacation, huh? I wish I had plans to go somewhere. It would take too much time and money to go back home, so I'll have to stay at the academy. Two whole months, though. That's a really long time.

He let out a sigh. Suddenly, he heard the sound of something hitting the French window. Kazuya glanced up and, as he wondered what it was, something hit it again, a little harder this time.

Pebbles.

Kazuya opened the window and peered outside.

There was a girl looking up at Kazuya's room on the second floor. When Kazuya emerged from the window, her face lit up with joy.

She had short blonde hair and big, sparkling blue eyes. She was sitting on a suitcase, swinging her slender legs.

Her name was Avril Bradley, an international student who arrived from England a few months ago and became friends with Kazuya through several incidents.

She waved her hand at Kazuya. "Kujou, do you have plans for summer break?"

"N-No."

"Wanna come with me to the Mediterranean?"

Kazuya looked perplexed. "You mean the Mediterranean?"

Avril nodded. Shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand, she squinted.

"Yup! My grandma—Sir Bradley's wife—has a small but cozy villa. I'll be spending a month with her before heading back home to England. She said I could bring a friend. But they have to be well-mannered. So, uhh..."

"Me?"

"Well, you're well-mannered..."

Avril suddenly turned red and fidgety. She looked up at Kazuya, her brows furrowed worriedly.

"The Mediterranean, huh?" Kazuya's face took on a thoughtful and distant look.

Yellow sun. White sand. Tanned, leisurely people. A table full of fresh fish and shellfish.

And a boundless, blue sea...

Kazuya's face lit up. "Thanks for the invite. I'm coming with you!"

"Really?" Avril beamed. She waved her hands in the air, jumping up and down. "I'm taking the afternoon train, so make sure your bags are packed by noon. I'll wait for you at the main gate later!"

"Okay!"

Feeling excited, Kazuya waved back at Avril and went back inside to start packing.

He was earnestly sifting through his belongings—textbooks, changes of clothes, his swimwear—when he heard a knock at the door.

He glanced up. “It’s ope—”

Before he could finish, the door burst open.

The red-haired dorm mother was standing there. Since it was summer break already, she was not wearing her usual apron, but instead a red dress that matched her hair and emphasized her curves. Kazuya, his cheeks red, asked her what was going on.

But the dorm mother only looked around the room without saying anything.

“Um, can you please stop looking for oriental clothes and accessories in my room?” Kazuya said.

She chuckled. “People love the stuff I take from here.”

“Take? More like rob if you ask me. So, did you need anything?”

The dorm mother, rummaging through the piles of luggage on the bed, snapped back to her senses.

“Uh yes, I did.”

“I see...”

“I forgot what it was. Wait, I remember now! A letter!” She shoved her hand into her cleavage in search of something. “It’s not here,” she mumbled. She searched her breast and hip pockets.

“I didn’t bring it with me!” She left the room and returned just as Kazuya was almost finished packing and had forgotten about her altogether.

“Here you go!” She handed him a letter that was sent by a family from back home. “I went to the post office and saw a letter addressed to you, so I took it.”

“Th-Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

With a wave of her hand, the dorm mother left, closing the door behind her.

Kazuya, having finished packing, glanced at the wall clock. There was still quite some time before noon.

He turned his gaze to the letter and saw the sender’s name.

“Ah!”

Kazuya's eyebrows twitched, and he bolted out of his room.
"This is bad. I gotta see Victorique!"

St. Marguerite's Grand Library.

Covered in countless vines, the glorious European Hall of Knowledge, its gray stone walls marked by seven hundred years' worth of history, stood like a gigantic cylindrical shadow under the summer sky.

Flinging the riveted, leather door open, a small oriental boy—Kazuya Kujou—burst into the library and onto a spacious hall.

Huge bookshelves lined the walls, all the way up to the ceiling adorned with majestic religious paintings.

Today, too, Kazuya began climbing the labyrinthine wooden stairs that led up to the conservatory far above.

Up.

Up and up.

Still a long way to go.

After about ten minutes, Kazuya finally made it to the top of the staircase, huffing and puffing. From there he stepped into the familiar conservatory that housed tropical trees, huge garish flowers, and piles of books scattered on the floor.

"Victorique!"

There was a low grunt. Delighted by what sounded like a response from her, Kazuya smiled.

A few months ago, she would just ignore me when I called her name. I've been getting a lot of groans in response lately. Hehehe.

He strode deeper into the conservatory.

Like a fairy tale protagonist dropping bread on the path, today she seemed to have moved deeper into the garden, scattering books along the way. Following the books to the far end of the conservatory, where he would not normally set foot, he found Victorique sitting on a large tree branch, her face buried in a book.

Wrapped in a pale purple dress with a large velvet ribbon tied in a bow behind her, she looked like a rare tropical bird perched on a branch. Her magnificent golden hair hanging down to the ground rippled occasionally.

"What is it, Kujou?"

"I don't know if you remember."

Kazuya nimbly leapt off the ground and sat down next Victorique. Raising her eyebrow a little, Victorique gave him a disapproving look. Her pale emerald eyes flickered coldly.

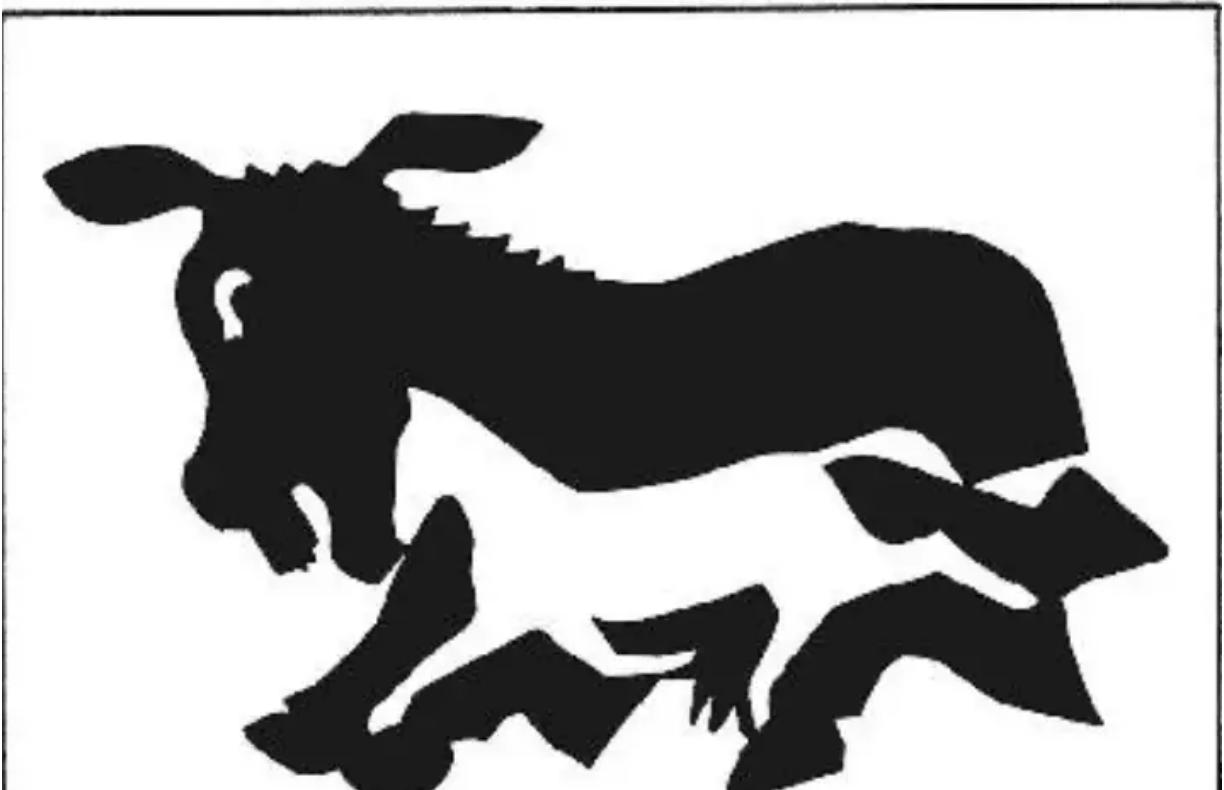
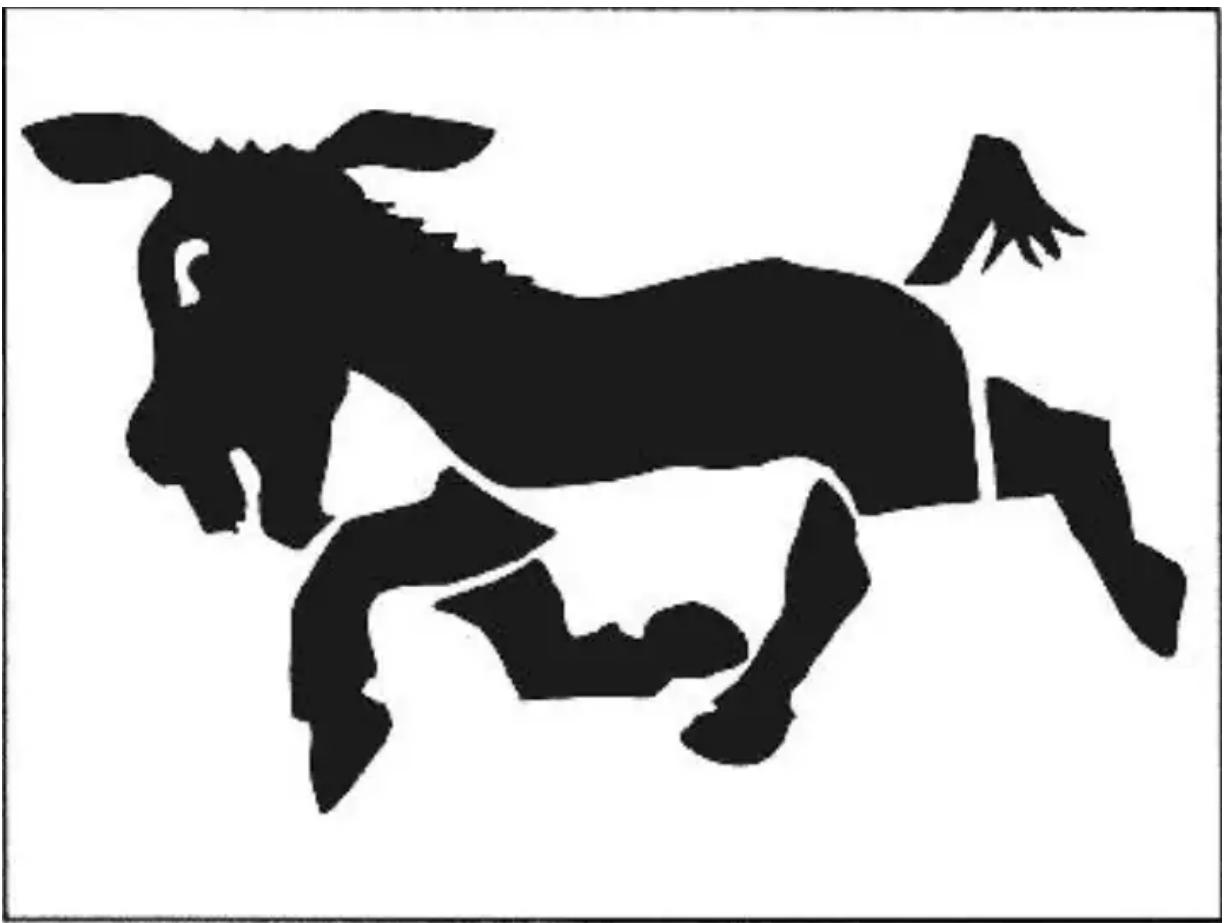
Kazuya took out a letter from his breast pocket. "Last spring, when we just met, you gave my brother a riddle to be solved in five minutes."

"The Pony Puzzle," Victorique replied in her husky voice. An irritating, triumphant look appeared on her face. "It looks like it took him more than five minutes, though."

"It's not his fault the letter has to be delivered across the sea. Anyway, I got his reply earlier. Let's open it."

Victorique sniffed audibly.

Kazuya quickly opened the letter from his second oldest brother. He seemed to have given up writing in English, instead using their own language. The first page featured a figure that looked to be the answer to the riddle.





Kazuya let out a groan of admiration. “I see. I get it. Talk about looking at things from a different angle. Wow. Both you and my brother.”

Victorique continued reading, showing no interest in his brother’s answer.

“Let’s see. There’s a message. ‘Tell the little girl that it was easy, and I solved it in three minutes.’ Weird. Both he and my sister seem to think that you’re a child. Well, you’re certainly childish. Ouch! Stop kicking me! You’re gonna knock me off the branch!”

Victorique snorted.

“Oh, there’s something written in the corner.”

Kazuya found a secretly scribbled message and read it to Victorique. Written in his sister’s handwriting, it was about his brother: “Your brother was having so much trouble with the puzzle. One night I woke him up, because he was having a nightmare about horses. When he couldn’t figure it out, he went to his alma mater and begged for his professor’s help.”

Victorique chuckled.

Kazuya laughed too. As he was about to put the letter away, he noticed another piece of paper, and opened it. It bore the words “I challenge you” in huge letters. He let out a weary sigh.

Victorique looked at him. “What’s wrong?”

“I just remembered that there’s someone else who’s just as competitive as you. My brother’s issuing you a challenge. Do you want to accept it or just ignore?”

Victorique’s eyebrows twitched. “I accept, of course.”

“I see, I see. Let me read it, then.”

Kazuya reluctantly straightened his back, lifted the letter to chest level, and began reading.

“Hmm... ‘Young Tarou, Young Jirou, and Young Saburou went to the mountains’.”

“Wait, hold on a minute!” Victorique interrupted.

“What?”

“What are those names?”

“All right. I’ll change them. Jean, Phil, and Pierre went to the mountains.”

Victorique nodded in satisfaction. “That will do.”

“Yeah, yeah. ‘The three of them had been ordered by the feudal lord—no, the Count—to carry three logs down the mountain in one trip. But each log was too heavy for one person to carry.’”

“What a weak lot.”

“You’re one to talk. ‘Then Pierre remembered that the Count ordered each man to carry two logs each. They did as they were told and successfully brought the logs down the mountain. The question is, how did they do it? You have two minutes to solve it. If you take more than two minutes, you’ll get a spanky-spanky. Ugh, that’s kinda creepy. All right, I guess I’ll have to time you. Hmm? What are you doing?’”

Kazuya lifted his eyes from the letter and saw Victorique, the book still in her lap, using her thumbs and forefingers to make a triangle.





Her cheeks were red with excitement.

“Wh-What is it?” Kazuya asked.

“I solved it! I solved it in an instant! Less than a second. Proof once again that nothing is impossible to my Wellspring of Wisdom. I will awaken the fragments of chaos in this world and reconstruct—”

“Wait a sec. What is that triangle?”

Victorique gave Kazuya a surprised look, and her cheeks puffed up.

“What’s wrong?”

“Listen closely, Kujou the Reaper. Since I’m a generous person, I will explain it so that a dumb, terribly stupid buffoon like you can understand.”

“Sue me, all right?! Just spit it out already!”

Victorique shot him a glare. Then regaining her composure, she made a triangle again with her fingers.

“First they arrange the logs this way, in the shape of a triangle. Then Jean, Phil, and Pierre stand at each corner, each holding one log in their right hand and another in their left. That way, all three would carry two logs each. That’s how they went down the mountain.”

“Oh!” Kazuya nodded, impressed. “I see.”

“Make sure you tell your brother that I solved it in one second. Also...”

Victorique smiled thinly.

The wind blew, rustling the foliage.

A bright summer sky was peeking through the skylight. The sunlight was dazzling.

Victorique pursed her glossy, cherry lips. “Send my regards to the math professor.”

At the far end of the conservatory was a large open skylight, from which a dry summer breeze blew, beating at the purple velvet ribbon tied around Victorique’s waist.

Her magnificent golden hair, too, fluttered occasionally.

Far from the clamor of the world below, the conservatory, as it had always been even before the summer break, was filled with silence, tedium, and intelligence.

“Oh, that’s right.” Kazuya slammed his fist on his palm, and jumped down the tree branch. “I’ve got to go.”

“Are you heading somewhere?” A slightly forlorn voice came from above.

Kazuya nodded. "Uh yeah, actually..."

"What?" Victorique's cold and expressionless eyes regarded him.

"Summer break starts today," Kazuya said after a bit of hesitation.

"Uhm..."

"I'll be staying here," Victorique replied flatly. She swung her tiny feet, enclosed by a purple lace-up shoes that matched her dress. "Always."

Like a mystical bird perched on a tree, she was looking at Kazuya, her head cocked to the side.

Then in a bored, slightly somber, husky voice, she mumbled, "Where are you going?"

"Me?" Kazuya scratched his head.

The wind blew again, stirring Victorique's long, golden hair and Kazuya's short, black hair.

"I, uhh..."

Noon came.

All of the students had left hurriedly in the morning. The French-style garden in the vast campus of St. Marguerite Academy was unbelievably quiet.

A clear blue sky hung over the grounds like a boundless curtain. Gigantic white clouds towered in the distance. The sun had grown more intense, seemingly burning the garden slowly.

Avril Bradley was waiting for someone at the huge main gate that led outside, leaning against the iron fence adorned with intricate scrollwork. Sitting on a large suitcase, she whirled her head around from left to right.

"What's taking him so long?"

Looking bored, she stood up, frowning a little at the intense sunlight, and started kicking the suitcase.

Suddenly she raised her head. "There he is!" Her face lit up with joy when she spotted the boy she had been waiting for running towards her. "Wait..." But when she noticed that Kazuya Kujou was empty-handed, no suitcase or any sort of luggage, she looked puzzled.

"Kujou, where's your stuff?"

Kazuya was panting hard. "A-Avril..."

He ran straight to the front gate and stopped in front of Avril. Straightening his back, he bent his waist at a ninety-degree angle.

“Wh-What is that oriental pose?!”

“Sorry, Avril!” Kazuya lifted his head back up. “I’m really glad you invited me to come with you. I didn’t have any plans for the summer, and I thought it would be boring. But...”

“I got it.” Avril nodded, pouting.

She looked up, peered beyond the flowerbeds, pathways, gazebos, fountains, the huge school building, and stared at the gray stone walls of the library tower in the distance.

The gray tower stood in silence as it always had, casting a lonely shadow on the ground, detached from everything—the summer sky hanging like a curtain over the garden, the glaring sunlight, the water trickling down the fountains like melting ice.

Avril bit her lip.

“I’m sorry,” Kazuya said worriedly.

“It’s fine.” Avril lifted her suitcase. “I’ll send you a postcard.”

“O-Okay...”

“I’ll write ‘Look how much I’m having fun, idiot’.”

“Ugh...”

“I’m just kidding. See you after the break.”

Kazuya stood by the gate as he watched Avril go, her slim figure and short, blonde hair slowly moving toward the station.

Summer rays beat down from above, hot as the yellow Mediterranean sun. Kazuya’s short shadow fell on the glittering lush lawn. A moment later, Avril turned around, waved her hand ruefully, and disappeared.





A dry wind blew.

Kazuya heaved a sigh.

Then he turned around and started walking down the pathway.

With most of the students gone, the academy seemed like an abandoned house in the summer.

Thus began the first day of Victorique's and Kazuya's long summer break.

Chapter 2: A Ghost Scattering Flowers

Summer had finally arrived, casting blinding sunlight over the campus of St. Marguerite Academy, a school nestled on a gentle mountain slope.

Several days had passed since the beginning of the summer break.

With most of its students gone, silence reigned on the spacious and majestic school, as if an eternity had passed and all living things had perished.

Every now and then squirrels came scuttling down the hills inside the campus, chittering.

The colorful flowers in the flowerbeds swayed in the hot wind, despite there being no one to marvel at them.

The gazebos cast dark, square shadows on the lush lawn.

There was only stillness, the summer sun, and...

“Oh, my goodness.”

A little before noon.

A petite woman came out of the school building carrying a bunch of what seemed like test papers, worried about the round glasses that were slipping off her nose. The teacher—Ms. Cecile—suddenly stopped, and squinted, peering at the soft grass beyond the flowerbeds and fountains.

“They’re over there again, huh?”

Shifting the bundle of papers back carefully in her hands, Ms. Cecile hurried away.

“Hanging out again today?” Ms. Cecile said as she passed by the lawn.

The pair—one of them, rather—nodded, an oriental boy of small stature. He was standing stiffly upright, wearing a serious look that was slowly becoming his trademark. Since it was summer break, he wasn’t in his uniform. Instead he wore an oriental indigo kimono, apparently a casual outfit in his home country, complete with a black sash and wooden sandals. On his head sat a familiar bowler hat. He was holding a pink, frilly parasol in one hand, a mismatch against his attire and no-nonsense expression.

Ms. Cecile's large, droopy eyes narrowed in a smile as she stared at the Japanese international student, Kazuya Kujou, and a certain someone lying on the lawn under the shadow cast by the parasol.

Ms. Cecile nodded. "Look after her for me, Kujou."

"I will." Kazuya stood even more upright.

After watching Ms. Cecile leave in a hurry, Kazuya's serious façade crumbled.

"Hey, Victorique. Victorique! Ms. Cecile just asked me to look after you. Now I feel like I need to do something. Hey, are you listening? Earth to Victorique!"

Standing stiff-backed on a lawn in the corner of St. Marguerite Academy's deserted campus, Kazuya regarded his beautiful, frilly, lacey, fluffy little friend, who was lying face down in the middle of the round shadow created by the parasol.

The girl—Victorique de Blois—possessing an intellect she called her Wellspring of Wisdom, Europe's last and most powerful weapon, had been lying motionless on the grass since a while ago.

Her magnificent, wavy golden hair, like an untied velvet turban, was sprawled across the lawn. She was wearing a luxurious ruffled dress of white silk and woven black lace, and a similar black-and-white headdress covered her tiny head softly.

Kazuya, worried that she might have taken a nap, peered into her face. Victorique's rosy cheeks puffed out, her green eyes, glazed over like someone who had lived for decades, wide-open, gleaming like jade.

"Oh, you're awake."

"Be quiet, Kujou."

"Excuse me? I've been standing here holding a parasol for you, while you're down there lying like an idiot, bored out of your mind. I might just go down from the heat before you."

Victorique, still lying face-down, let out a groan, pursing her small, cherry lips.

"I'm so bored."

"I can see why."

"I don't even want to read a book."

“Because it’s hot. Why are you even in the hottest part of the campus? You really don’t make any sense.”

“Hmm?”

Victorique slowly rolled over to the right to lie on her back. Immediately Kazuya rushed over with his parasol, his kimono rustling, to give her shade.

Victorique frowned, exhaling sharply. She glanced at his feet. “Those are some weird shoes!”

“It’s called *geta*,” Kazuya said. “They’re the best in the summer. Would you like to wear them?”

“I’m not going to wear firewood as shoes.”

She rolled back to the other side face-down, and Kazuya quickly followed her. For a while, the pair continued playing their idle game of chase on the vast lawn, until eventually giving up.

A hot, dry summer breeze blew, ruffling Kazuya’s black hair.

Leaves and flowers rustled faintly in the distance.

Water continued cascading down the white fountain like a pillar of ice melting in the hot wind.

A quiet summer.

“Speaking of which, Victorique.”

Victorique grunted in response.

“Where’s your energy? Anyway, the reason I was running around looking for you today...”

Today, several days since summer break started, Kazuya had been looking for Victorique since morning.

With one hand holding the parasol, he reached into his sleeve and pulled out an envelope. Still lying face-down, Victorique glanced up curiously.

“What a weird pocket! Typical, I suppose.”

“Shut up. So anyway, the farting new—I-I mean Avril. Darn it. You’re rubbing off on me. I got a letter from Avril Bradley. She went to visit her grandma at her summer house in the Mediterranean.”

Kazuya tried to sound cheerful. He was, in fact, invited by Avril Bradley to come with her, but he couldn’t leave his friend Victorique de Blois, a small and lonely Gray Wolf, alone at the academy. After much internal debate, he decided to stay behind with her in the deserted school.

“She says there’s been a string of weird incidents. I don’t really get it, but it’s a mystery, at least. Your most favorite thing in the world. Well?

Interested?"

Victorique gave a faint groan. Lying on her belly, motionless like a napping white cat, she said, very languidly, "A case brought by someone who loves ghost stories? Reeks of nonsense."

"Hmm..."

"But I suppose it's better than being bored all day."

"Really?!"

"Yes. Read it to me."

Nodding in relief, Kazuya straightened his back. Holding the parasol in one hand, and the letter in the other, he started reading the letter.

"Bongiorno, Kujou!"

"What is that about?"

"It's what the letter says. Let's see... **'I'm writing this letter on the train to the Mediterranean. I was reading Ghost Stories Vol. 2.'**"

"Hmm..."

"I just finished it, so I was left with nothing to do. And then...""

It was several days before Kazuya read the letter that Avril Bradley arrived at the town in the Mediterranean Sea, in the evening of the first day of summer vacation.

Dry sand. Clear blue skies. Endless coastline. The smell of the sea. The sandy white beach was packed with parasols and deck chairs. Summer visitors with sweaty, tanned skin were walking around coolly.

The sandy wind carried with it the powerful fragrance of suntan lotion mixed in with the smell of the tide.

Avril was in high spirits as the rocking roofless carriage, pulled by a donkey along the narrow cobblestone street, made its way to her late grandfather's villa. Of course, her male friend that she left behind at the academy was still in her mind.

"Grandma! I'm here!"

Avril gave a big wave in front of the old, but well-maintained, square two-story house. When she saw the old lady waving back from the second-story window, she jumped down the carriage and ran off, overjoyed.

She bumped into a boy pulling a small cart filled with colorful flowers and tumbled, scattering her luggage all over the road. The adult vacationers who saw the whole thing chuckled, and Avril blushed with embarrassment.

The flower vendor—a boy of Italian descent who looked to be about the same age as Avril—swiftly picked up all of Avril's belongings, then helped her on her feet.

“Th-Thank you.”

The boy studied Avril's face for quite a while, then suddenly looked angry. He talked rapidly, but Avril didn't understand Italian, so she just stared back at him in confusion.

This time the boy looked sad. He grabbed a small red bouquet from the flowers for sale and threw it at Avril.

She let out a yelp.

The boy took a couple of steps back, glaring at her.

“Is this for me?” Avril asked, bewildered.

As she glanced back and forth between the boy and the red bouquet of flowers, an old woman came out of the villa. Her grandmother.

“Th-Thanks again,” Avril said, then hurried towards the villa, carrying her suitcase.

“Oh, that's Mitch,” said Sir Bradley's wife.

After exploring the villa and happily going on about her summer holiday plans, Avril had finally settled down and was having a cup of tea with her grandmother.

“Mitch?” Avril asked, munching on a cookie.

Her grandmother nodded. She was a tall, straight-backed old woman with silver hair pulled back in a tight bun. While her face was lined with wrinkles, her eyes, blue as her granddaughter's, had the gleam of a mischievous child.

“He's the son of an Italian couple who live around here. I see him every summer, but I don't speak their language, so I haven't talked to him.”

“I see.”

“The bouquet of flowers says he likes you.”

“He was glaring at me, though.”

“He doesn't like you, then.”

“Which is it?!”

Avril's grandmother giggled at the sight of her granddaughter's angry face.

“Let’s forget about Mitch,” the old lady said, her face taking on a slightly serious look. “Do you remember Frannie Bradley?”

“Frannie? Nope. Who’s that?”

“Your cousin. You only met her once, though, when you were little, so it makes sense if you don’t remember. She’s two or three years older than you. She wanted to come here to the villa, so I said sure. Since she’s close to your age, I thought you’d get along. But apparently she hates you.”

“Wh-Why?!”

“Because of the Penny Black case.”

Avril’s face clouded.

The Penny Black was a rare stamp that the late Adventurer Sir Bradley bequeathed to his granddaughter Avril, who kept it in memory of her beloved grandfather without selling it.

“She used to be such a gentle child, but for some reason she grew up to be bitter. She said you were hogging all the inheritance and that you must be after this villa too. She’ll be arriving tonight. You two better get along.”

“Aw, really?” Avril frowned.

Her grandmother chuckled. “Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll get along just fine.”

Later that night.

Avril was in the small room upstairs provided to her, holding a quill pen and groaning to herself. A piece of paper lay before her.

So far the letter contained only what she had written on the train on the way here, about how she had finished reading the book and had nothing to do.

“Hmm. I want to write about fun things to make him feel bitter. But nothing’s really happened yet. What do I do... Hmm?”

Sensing some kind of presence, Avril glanced up.

The door to her room opened, and there stood a beautiful girl a little older than her, with golden hair cut short and eyes as blue as the summer sky, just like her.

“Are you Frannie?” Avril asked.

“And you must be my sworn enemy, Avril.” Frannie studied her for a while. “You should leave right away. This villa is haunted!”

“Haunted?!” Avril screamed.

Frannie seemed to have misinterpreted her scream as caused by fear. Smiling, she dropped her voice low.

“Someone died in this villa seven years ago, you see. A beautiful Italian girl, who was assaulted and abandoned by nobles on vacation, threw herself into the sea with a bouquet of flowers in her arms. Her body was brought to this villa, but attempts to revive her failed. Since then, people have spotted the ghost of a woman in a white dress, holding flowers.... Kyaaaah!”

Avril shrieked, her eyes lighting up with delight. Frannie’s blue eyes narrowed in satisfaction, and she went on to explain how the ghost in the white dress had terrorized the villa’s residents.

Avril, with a twinkle in her eyes, begged for more ghost stories. Sensing something off with her cousin, Frannie slowly backed away.

Avril leapt back to the table. Licking the quill pen’s nib, she began writing at incredible speed.

“I’m having a lot of fun here, Kujou. Get this: this villa is haunted! And...”

As Avril continued writing her lengthy letter, the door to the room opened to the outside, slowly and quietly.

She thought she saw a slim and creepy shadowy figure.

She looked at the door. Not paying it too much heed, she turned her eyes back to the letter.

This time, outside the window, against the backdrop of a starry sky, something passed by, glowing softly.

A single red petal fluttered down from above, landing on the letter.

“Hmm?” Avril cocked her head.

Slowly she looked up.

A woman in a white dress was floating outside the window. Flower petals scattered in the air.

Avril stared blankly at the woman for a while.

Then her breath caught.

“Th-This is the second floor!”





Avril jumped to her feet, not to run away, but to dart straight at the window.

With a strange motion, the woman moved away from the window, leaving petals behind. Avril peered out the window, looked at all directions, but there was no one there.

Not a single soul.

“‘Not a single soul.’ The letter ends there.”

After he finished reading the letter, Kazuya straightened his back, and expressed his thoughts with a bit of annoyance on his face.

“This Frannie person is hopeless. She’s probably using ghost stories to scare Avril off out of the villa, but if she knew better, she’d know that telling her ghost stories would only make her stay up all night to meet one.”

“...”

Kazuya glanced down at the unresponsive Victorique. Lying on the grass within St. Marguerite Academy’s vast campus, she looked even wearier than before. He felt worried.

Eventually Victorique twitched. She lifted her head up just a little bit, stirring her long, magnificent golden hair.

She was pouting. “What an inane letter! An incredible friend you have there, Kujou.”

“Uh, I’m sorry,” Kazuya mumbled apologetically.

A dry, almost-blistering summer breeze blew softly over the silent Victorique’s small figure, rippling the hem of dress, woven of lace and fine silk.

“Kujou,” Victorique finally said in her husky voice. “Forget that stupid letter and bring me a greater mystery. Or else...”

“Or else what?”

“You will suffer the consequences.”

Victorique softly closed her eyes and let out a tired sigh.

What did she mean by that? Kazuya wondered.

Reluctantly he continued holding up the frilly parasol. He pictured himself sporting weird hairdos, from pointy to swirly.

A summer breeze blew past.

The two stayed motionless like figures in a painting depicting an idle scene.

Heat and silence drifted in the afternoon lawn.

The next morning.

Kazuya was eating breakfast alone silently in the men's dorm's dining hall. Dressed in a kimono, he had his back straight as he dined on a fried egg sandwich, a bean salad, and a glass of fresh milk.

The sexy, red-haired dorm mother, holding a cigarette in her mouth as she read the morning paper, legs crossed, let out a surprised grunt.

Kazuya glanced up.

"Hey, Kujou. You know that friend of yours with the short blonde hair?"

"You mean Avril Bradley? What about her?"

"She's on the paper."

Kazuya bolted to his feet. He rushed to the dorm mother's side to take a look at the article.

"A White Lady Appears with the Smell of Flowers!"

Kazuya let out a yelp and furiously read the morning paper.

As he raised his head back up, the dorm mother said in a familiar tone, "You can have it. I'm done reading."

"Really? Thank you!"

Kazuya, having barely finished his breakfast, shoved the morning paper into his pocket, put on his bowler hat, and hurried out of the men's dormitory.

A second later he returned, his *geta* clacking on the floor, ran up the dormitory stairs, and took from his room a small, frilly parasol that clashed with his attire, holding it under his arm.

"Victorique!"

And letting out his usual cry, he dashed out of the dormitory.

"Victorique! Wait, you're here again today? You're gonna get a heatstroke."

While on his way to St. Marguerite's Grand Library, Kazuya spotted a white, frilly figure curled up on the same lawn as yesterday, and came to a sudden halt.

Like a lazy kitten, the mass of white frills moved slowly.

Victorique looked up, her stunning golden hair stirring. "Oh, it's you."

"Yes, it's me. Here you go."

Wearing a stern look, Kazuya opened the frilly parasol and held it over the peculiar girl. He straightened his back stiffly. For a while, they remained silent.

Ms. Cecile passed by them, carrying a bunch of books. When she noticed the pair, she stopped and put her hand on the rim of her large round glasses.

“Is this *deja-vu*?” the teacher said curiously. “I feel like I’ve seen this exact scene yesterday.” She walked away thoughtfully.

The summer sun was slowly roasting the two of them. A bead of sweat trickled down Kazuya’s forehead. After a few moments of silence, he remembered something.

“Oh, by the way.”

“What is it, Kujou the farting friend of the farting newt?”

“Now listen here… Nah, never mind. Your sharp tongue isn’t exactly something new. Anyway, it looks like there’s something more to yesterday’s letter. I got this morning’s paper from the dorm mother. There’s an article that sounds like a follow-up to the incident described in Avril’s letter. You interested?”

Victorique groaned, still lying on the grass.

“I’m not uninterested,” she said stubbornly.

“You could’ve just said yes. Seriously.”

Kazuya started reading the newspaper.

“A White Lady Appears with the Smell of Flowers?!”

“On the evening of the 25th of July, a strange incident drew attention in this bustling, modern town known as a summer retreat. The incident took place in the first floor of a villa owned by the widow of the late Sir Bradley, a famous adventurer…”

The incident that produced the newspaper article took place in the evening, the day after Avril arrived in the Mediterranean.

“Grandma!”

Dusk.

The dazzling sunset turned Sir Bradley’s square house yellow.

“Grandma!”

Avril, wearing a bright white coat over a polka-dot swimsuit, scrambled into the first-floor hall of the villa. When she saw the group of old ladies

dressed as nearly as her grandmother—blouses up to the collar and long, ankle-length skirts—she shut her mouth.

She tugged on her coat to cover her legs and stomach, tanned from staying out all day.

Her grandmother smiled and introduced her to her guests. “I have another granddaughter. Avril, where’s Frannie?”

Avril inclined her head. Then she bolted upstairs in search of Frannie, but her cousin wasn’t in any of the rooms.

After looking around for a while, Avril shouted to the first floor. “She’s not here!”

There was no reply.

Avril waited for a moment, and then, feeling something off, she slowly made her way down the stairs.

One step at a time.

She caught a sweet, yet somewhat disturbing scent—different from the smell of the sea that she had grown accustomed to—that grew stronger the closer she got to the first floor.

What’s this sweet smell? Ah, flowers. Smells like flowers.

Avril’s pace gradually quickened.

Stifling...

She was moving faster and faster.

Why does it smell so much? There’s no flowers in this house!

Avril dashed down the stairs, across the hallway, and into the first floor hall.

“G-Grandma!” she shouted.

The old women who had been smiling in the hall just a moment ago had collapsed on the sofa, some sitting on the floor, unconscious. Avril rushed to her grandmother and helped her up.

“What’s wrong? What happened?!”

Her grandmother blearily opened her blue, moist eyes. “Avril... We smelled flowers,” she whispered. “And then...”

The old women soon regained consciousness, none of them sustaining any serious injuries, but no one could offer a reasonable explanation for the sweet smell that filled the flowerless room.

“There is an urgent need to shed light on this bizarre incident.”
That’s the end of the article.”

When he finished reading, Kazuya folded the newspaper and put it in his pocket.

He crouched down and peered into Victorique’s small and smooth porcelain face.

“Victorique?”

A faint groan.

“Were you listening?”

“Sort of,” Victorique replied listlessly.

She got up, slowly and wearily, and snorted through her pretty small nose. She stretched her slender arms; her tiny frame extended surprisingly long. A moment later, it returned to normal.

“Well? What do you think?” Kazuya asked.

“Not enough fragments of chaos. The story has too many holes, Kujou.”

“R-Really? S-Sorry.”

“Apologies won’t cut it.”

“What?! S-Seriously?”

“Of course. So either dance or sing for me as an apology.”

Kazuya lowered the parasol and took a deep breath, but when he realized how unreasonable the demand was, he closed his mouth. Just as he was about to give the tyrannical, spoiled, mean Victorique a piece of his mind, he sensed something approaching from afar.

The sound of breathing and small footsteps.

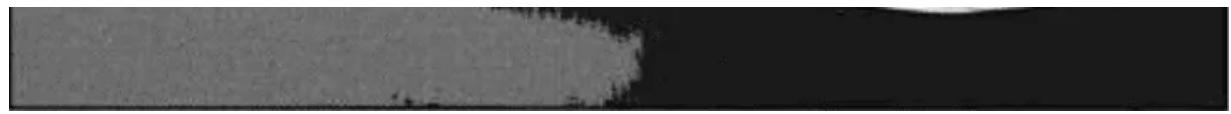
Kazuya and Victorique raised their heads at the same time and saw a cute dog scurrying across the grass toward them.

Kazuya gaped at the animal that had suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Victorique lifted her body up and watched the dog with expressionless, jade-green eyes.

“Quite adorable,” Victorique mumbled.

Kazuya glanced at her ruthless small face, startled at the unexpected remark. Victorique’s expression changed, just slightly, into what seemed like a smile. The white dog ran up to Victorique and pressed its black nose to her small, pretty nose, sniffing her.





Then it wagged its tail.

Victorique looked a little delighted. If she had a tail, she might have given it a little wag as well.

The white dog looked up at Kazuya. For some reason, it growled, then ran off back in the direction it had come from. Its white fur rippled under the bright summer sun as it receded into the distance.

“Whose dog was that?”

“Who knows?”

The summer sun was beating down on them today too.

The long, long summer vacation had just begun, and both Victorique and Kazuya were taking it easy on the grass.

A few days later, noon.

A peaceful village near St. Marguerite Academy.

Kazuya was walking along a corner of the village, where red geraniums glittered brightly in the midsummer sun. He bought a few things, plain and simple stationery, some modest clothes, and resumed walking alone with his back straight.

A shaggy horse pulling a wagon neighed as it overtook him.

Village girls were chatting in front of a store, giggling and nudging each other. As Kazuya strode past them, he stopped in his tracks.

“Right! I need to buy a bigger parasol!”

He entered the store filled with young girls, a little bashfully. He found several parasols large enough to hold three or four adults and began to rummage through them with a grim look on his face.

When a village girl spotted him, she asked, “Are you looking for something?”

Startled, Kazuya turned around, back straight. “Yes. Um, I’m looking for a big parasol.” He paused for a moment to think. “Preferably white or pink, with pretty ruffles.”

“What?”

The village girls exchanged curious glances. After much racket, explaining everything to an older staff, they picked out the biggest, frillest, pure-white parasol.

“Are you using it?”

“Uh, no. It’s for, um, a-a friend,” Kazuya replied stiffly.

Being surrounded by several girls made him a little nervous. As he was leaving the store, he spotted a small wooden object in the corner that looked like a cage. It was elegantly decorated, surrounded by thin wood, with an open ceiling.

“Um, what’s this?”

A female staff sighed. “It’s for little dogs and cats.”

“Dogs?”

“Yeah. So they don’t leave. Only the nobility would use such a luxury item. We tried stocking up on it, but it’s not selling well.”

After thinking about it for a bit, Kazuya said, “Uh, I’ll buy this one too, then.”

“You are?!” The staff couldn’t believe what she just heard.

Straightening himself, Kazuya left the store carrying a big parasol and a strange cage. He was about to head straight back to St. Marguerite Academy when he decided to stop by the small post office.

He calmly walked inside, and then a few moments later, came running out in a hurry.

In his hand was a letter.

“V-Victorique!” he shouted.

Kazuya, his mature calmness gone, dashed straight to the academy, eyes forward. His *geta* clattered on the ground.

The village girls chatting in front of the store exchanged curious looks.

“He must have a lot going on,” one said.

“So mysterious,” another added.

Bright-red geranium flowers swayed in the dry summer breeze. Clouds of dust rose and fell on the village road.

A wagon slowly passed by.

The summer sun scorched every corner of the village. A hot wind blew.

“Victorique! You’re here again?!”

Kazuya stopped in the middle of the lush, gently-sloping lawn of St. Marguerite Academy.

As had been the case for the past few days, today, his precious little, spoiled, ruthless friend, Victorique de Blois, was lying in the middle of the grass, rolling repeatedly to the right and to the left.

She gave a faint groan in response.

As she tried to raise her small golden head, Victorique's tiny frame, wrapped in black-and-white frills and laces, lurched to the right, and she rolled down the gentle slope.

Unable to stop the momentum, she continued rolling, slowly and lazily.

Lifting the newly-purchased cage, Kazuya went after her. When he caught up, he used the cage to catch her.

An old memory flashed in his mind, back when his brothers took him with them to catch insects during summer break, swinging their nets around, searching for cicadas.

Summer in that island nation in the Orient was humid. Cicadas chirping. Damp and cloudy, beautiful summer.

“What do you think you’re doing, Kujou?”

Victorique’s husky, grim voice brought Kazuya out of his reverie. He glanced down at his little friend, whom he had saved using the cage, and found her glaring at him. She rose from the cage, her lovely jade-green eyes glinting.

It felt like it had been a while since he was able to look her straight in the face. Kazuya beamed.

“You imbecile!”

“Now that’s a downgrade. I don’t get it. Why are you even angry?”

“What is this?!”

Victorique kicked the cage with her laced, rose-embossed boots. Her face was red from anger. At first Kazuya watched her with astonishment, then he leaned against the cage, looking at Victorique with a smirk.

“Hehe. I caught you.”

“Wh-What did you say?!”

“You finally got off the grass. It’s a good sign. Now I open up this oversized parasol so you don’t get sunstroke. Oh, and I’ve got the continuation of the mystery. So can you please lighten up?”

“A continuation of the mystery, you say?”

“Yup.”

Kazuya pulled out from his sleeve Avril’s letter, which he had just received from the post office. When he showed it to Victorique, her green eyes twinkled a little like she wanted it. Kazuya smiled and straightened his

posture. Holding up the large, frilly parasol with one hand, he began reading the second letter from Avril in a stern and sonorous voice.

“Bongiorno again, Kujou!”

“The same introduction...”

“Stop complaining, Victorique. Here we go. **‘Hey, did you read the newspaper article about us? Believe me, I was shocked. The same day I sent the first letter, something happened again in the evening. It’s the bizarre incident mentioned in the newspaper article, where everyone fainted with the smell of flowers. But then later that night, a third incident occurred. Get this...’**”

A town in the Mediterranean.

It was a pleasant night. Stars twinkled in the night sky, the ocean breeze and the faint sound of waves caressing the tanned bodies of vacation-goers.

In counterpoint, Sir Bradley’s place was in an uproar, everyone clamoring about the strange incident that just happened.

Frannie, who had been away, returned.

“What’s going on? What’s with all the ruckus?” she asked.

Avril darted to her cousin’s side to explain what happened. Frannie, listening to Avril’s story with a look of shock, suddenly narrowed her blue eyes and stared off into the distance, across the street. Avril followed her gaze.

A figure in a white dress was walking on the other side of the darkening road. Their dress was floating off the ground, undulating uneasily as if swimming.

Garish red flowers scattered in the warm summer breeze, drifting to the side of the road.

“A ghost!” Avril screamed.

“S-See?! I told you!”

Frannie bolted away, and Avril quickly followed her. Faster they sprinted, weaving through shiny cars and roofless carriages ridden by vacationers.

The ghost in the white dress was heading toward the darkness. It turned a corner and disappeared. Frannie followed it.

Frannie let out a shriek. Avril hurriedly turned the corner...

...and found her cousin lying on the ground. When she got up, there was a white dress under her.

Mitch, who was pulling a cart full of flowers, stopped and looked at them curiously. When his eyes met Avril's, he pointed at Frannie, at the dress, then started saying something, but since he was speaking Italian, she couldn't understand him.

"It disappeared," Frannie said uneasily. "It turned the corner and was gone. I jumped at the dress as it fell." She looked up and stared at Avril. "With all these scary incidents happening, you can't stay in the villa anymore, can you? You must be terrified, and you should be."

Avril shook her head. "Nope. Not at all!"

Frannie looked perplexed.

"And then..."

That night.

Avril was in her room, licking her quill pen and writing a letter to Kazuya.

"And then it vanished! All that was left was the white dress. Was I shocked. I wonder if it will happen again. Ehehe."

Avril thought about what else to write. Still a little bit annoyed, she added a rather mean-spirited message at the end.

"So there you have it. I know I keep telling you this, but I'm having a lot of fun here. You should have come with me. Just kidding. Anyway, until next time. Say hello to the Gray Wolf for me. Later! From Avril."

"I wonder if it will happen again. Ehehe.' That's the end of the letter."

Casually skipping over the last lines, Kazuya neatly folded the letter and tucked it into his sleeve. He looked at Victorique, who was still flailing about in her cage.

"Do you have all the fragments of chaos yet?" Kazuya asked.

"Yes."

"That's great. It's Frannie, isn't it? She's the only one with a motive. She wants to scare Avril out of the villa."

Victorique raised her small face wearily. Her silky hair, long and golden, flowed straight down to the ground. Her lovely brows knitted a little.

"You're such an idiot, Kujou!"

Kazuya felt relieved to have his status raised back from an imbecile to an idiot. “I-I’m wrong?”

“This Frannie woman probably just loves ghost stories. She not only looks like someone we know, she also shares the same interest. They’re cousins, all right.”

“I-I see.”

“It was Mitch.”

“What?!” Kazuya exclaimed, not exactly pleased.

Victorique’s brows furrowed deeper. “You’re so loud.”

“Mitch is the culprit? How do you know that? Besides, that Italian boy has no motive, does he?”

“He does.”

“Does it have something to do with the woman who threw herself into the sea?”

“No. It has something to do with the farting newt.”

“...Avril?” Kazuya said curiously.

“Yes.” Victorique nodded.

Then she stretched and yawned in boredom. When she noticed Kazuya waiting patiently, she frowned.

“What is it? Don’t tell me you don’t get it.”

“Well, *sorry*. I am absolutely clueless.”

Victorique growled. She stretched again inside the cage and exhaled sharply.

“Fine. I’ll try to verbalize it in a way that a simpleton like you can understand.”

“You sure are patronizing for someone in a cage.”

“Hmm?”

“N-Nothing.”

“Anyway, it’s the Italian boy, Mitch, who was controlling the ghost in the white dress,” Victorique began in her trademarked husky voice. “His trick is simple. Child’s play, even. He just put a balloon inside a white dress and inserted some petals.”

“What?”

“In the first incident, he took a balloon with a dress on it and slowly passed by under the farting newt’s second-floor window. And you have your White Lady. In the second incident, everyone fainted with the smell of

flowers. A little too far for a prank, though, if you ask me. He probably planted a chemical called nitrobenzene in the hall. This chemical has a sweet scent similar to that of flowers, so florists sometimes sprinkle it on their goods. Too much of it can make customers sick.”

“Oh...”

“The third incident is what identifies Mitch as the culprit. As in the first incident, he dressed a balloon with petals in it, this time making the ghost walk on the street outside. But the balloon would go up in the air unless someone was pulling it. And if someone caught the ghost, they would find the balloon inside. That’s why Mitch was around the corner and all that was left was the ghost’s dress. He pulled the balloon to the corner, popped it, and hid the plastic. And when Frannie and the farting newt caught up to the ghost around the corner, all they found was the dress. Do you understand?”

“Uh-huh.” Kazuya nodded, still a little confused.

Holding up the parasol, he peered at the small, golden Wellspring of Wisdom still frowning in the cage.

“But what’s his motive?”

“The ghost was a gift to the girl.”

Victorique smiled thinly. Something akin to warmth flashed across her otherwise expressionless face, cold as a porcelain doll, then vanished like a fleeting dream at dawn.

Only the warmth’s remnants lingered for a while around the grass where they were standing.

“A gift?” Kazuya murmured.

Victorique nodded. “Yes. According to the farting newt’s first letter, the Italian boy bumped into her and gave her a bouquet of flowers. He must’ve really fancied her. But do you think that farting newt would be delighted to receive flowers? And since she couldn’t understand him, Mitch must have been distressed. He must have racked his brains trying to figure out what would be the best way to get this girl’s attention.”

“And a ghost is what he came up with? Sure, Avril loves ghost stories, but how did Mitch know about Avril’s interest in the macabre when he doesn’t even speak the language?”

“The farting newt mentioned in her letter that she was reading Ghost Stories: Volume 2 on the train. When she bumped into Mitch in front of the villa, her luggage was scattered to the ground, and Mitch picked them up.

Even if you don't understand the language, you can easily tell from the horrifying cover that it's a book of ghost stories."

Victorique paused, then suddenly chuckled. "A gift that's not flowers. A ghost created by a boy that appears before the girl every night. It's a little morbid, but quite romantic nevertheless. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I-I guess?" Kazuya wasn't sure what to think about it. "To be honest, I'm a little bit clueless about these sorts of things. I'm a total amateur when it comes to romance."

"Hmm, is that so?"

Kazuya stopped himself from saying 'yes.' He blushed a little.

He looked away from Victorique, straightened his back even more to hide his embarrassment, and held up the parasol stiffly upright. He remained silent.

Ms. Cecile hurried past in the distance.

The flowers in the flowerbeds swayed in the summer breeze. Water trickled down the fountain.

A beautiful summer afternoon.

A gift other than flowers. Doing everything to give the girl what she loved the most.

Kazuya wondered if the mysteries he brought Victorique counted as a gift that was not flowers.

The thought made him feel strange, a mix of pain and embarrassment, something he had never felt before.





“Should I tell Avril your deduction?” Kazuya said in a casual tone in an effort to hide his agitation.

“Knock yourself out.” Victorique looked away.

Kazuya nodded.

Victorique stood up inside the cage and stretched with a yawn. “It took no time at all.”

“Hmm? For what?”

“For the boredom to be back. The case was solved in the blink of an eye. Like a little piece of ice taken out of a midsummer garden. What do I do now?”

“Uhm, I see. Sorry...” Kazuya wore an apologetic look.

Victorique sniffed audibly. “You don’t need to apologize.”

A small smile touched her lips. Cold, expressionless green eyes glinted in the light.

Her magnificent golden hair, silky and glossy, stirred softly.

“This world was created using boredom as its foundation,” she muttered in a husky voice. “After every fierce revolution comes a lousy dictator. And this repeats for eternity. A period of dreadful monotony awaits every grand case. I’m aware of that, but I can’t stand it nevertheless.”

Kazuya recalled how Victorique solved the case of the monster lurking in St. Marguerite Academy’s clock tower just a week ago, right before the summer break started.

Victorique, the little Gray Wolf, who gathered all the fragments of chaos, reconstructed them, and solved the mystery in a magical way, all in the blink of an eye. Now she was once again caught in the grip of an incurable disease called boredom, lying on the grass in the middle of summer with no absolutely no idea what to do.

“I’m in a terribly foul mood at the moment,” Victorique declared. “I really feel like torturing you.”

“Wh-What do you mean by that? You can be so unreasonable sometimes.”

Wiping the sweat from his forehead, Kazuya held up the parasol to shield Victorique from the summer sun.





A small stream was flowing across the lawn.
A fountain sculpture of a weeping goddess towered before them.
Flowers were in full bloom, their bright petals glistening in the
flowerbeds of the deserted garden.

“I’ll make you suffer.”

“How exactly?”

Chapter 3: A Train Moving Away From Summer

The green grass glittered in the bright summer sun.

St. Marguerite Academy.

One summer day.

In a corner of the school, now deserted as most students had gone off to luxurious summer retreats along the Mediterranean or to the cooler plateaus of the Alps, there were small leather shoes adorned with cream-colored ribbons stepping on the soft grass, walking across the lawn.

The feet suddenly stopped, and its owner—a neatly-dressed, fifteen or sixteen-year-old girl wearing the uniform of St. Marguerite Academy—heaved a deep sigh.

Her shoulder-length hair, tied up with a cream-colored ribbon that matched her shoes, rippled in the dry breeze that was a little cool for summer. Casting her large eyes down, the girl let out another sigh.

“St. Marguerite Academy...” Her voice was soft, somewhat forlorn.

The girl was carrying in one hand a large, plain suitcase, while in the other a silver birdcage containing a big, richly-colored parrot. A thin string ran from the handle of the suitcase to a small, white dog playing around her feet.

“I guess this is goodbye,” she mumbled dejectedly as she started walking with the animals. There were tears in her large eyes.

The summer wind blew, wrapping around in gentle embrace.

One summer day.

“You’re going too far, Victorique.”

Meanwhile, at the back of St. Marguerite Academy’s vast garden.

The scorching sun was beaming down on the grass, and gigantic clouds loomed high above in the blue summer sky.

A gray library towered bleakly in the distance. In front of it was a flowerbed full of colorful flowers, a stream, and a white fountain that trickled like a melting pillar of ice.

Petals and grass swayed in the hot wind.

A deserted garden in the summer.

“I’ve had it up to here with you!” bellowed a boy in a slightly oriental-accented French.

He was standing in front of a small, cozy gazebo situated in a corner of the garden, baked by the sun. A foreign student from a country in the Orient, the boy—Kazuya Kujou—was slowly earning a reputation in the school. Today he was dressed in a bright, indigo kimono, a thin bowler hat, and wooden sandals.

“I’ve had enough of your spoiled attitude!”

“Because you won’t apologize,” came a low, husky voice that sounded like it belonged to an old woman. The sweltering wind died down for a moment, as though startled by the coldness of the voice, and a chilling silence blanketed the area.

Kazuya was fuming, unfazed.

A small girl was sitting on a pretty stool beneath the round shadow cast by the gazebo’s pointed roof. Her laced socks, floral ballet slippers, and the hem of her frilly skirt were visible from under the small round table. Huge, difficult books lay open in a semi-circle atop.

Kazuya firmly faced the girl hidden behind the table and pile of books.

“You always get mad over the smallest things. Who cares about snacks? You can just buy another one.”

“Who cares?” The husky voice became icier, and grimmer.

Kazuya sighed. “Fine. I’m sorry.” Reluctantly he lifted his foot.

Under his *geta* was a strawberry cake that had been crushed by the two wooden bars of the sandal.

“I just dropped it and stepped on it by accident,” Kazuya mumbled wearily. “But you can still eat it. The middle part is still intact.”

“You can blame your firewood-looking sandals for that.”

“L-Leave my *geta* alone!”

Victorique exhaled sharply. She tilted her book to cast a brief glance at Kazuya. Her mysterious green eyes, melancholic and thoughtful, like those

of an old timer who had lived for a hundred years, yet seemingly vacant, were glaring straight at Kazuya, tears in the corners.

Sh-She's mad. Kazuya shuddered at the look on her face. She was staring fixedly at him. *When we first met, I couldn't really keep her attention for this long. Maybe this means we're getting closer? Still, she looks terrifying!*

Giving up on the strawberry cake, Kazuya entered the gazebo and sat down on the bench across from Victorique. He propped his elbow on the table, rested his cheek on his hand, then studied Victorique.

Today she was wearing a black laced dress with floral patterns. A thin belt made of white and yellow floral ornaments was wrapped around her waist, and atop her small head, on her magnificent golden hair, sat a tiny ruffled hat that looked like a flower in full bloom. Victorique looked as lovely as a bouquet of flowers.

She was staring at Kazuya with cold, expressionless green eyes. Stifling a laugh, Kazuya poked Victorique's rosy, puffed-out cheeks with his forefinger.

Victorique's expression turned blank, and then, with the sluggish movements of some large, ancient creature, she hid behind the book.

“Don't touch me.”

“Oh, come on. It was just a poke.”

There was no reply.

“I'll buy you a different one,” Kazuya said. “Apparently this shop is popular among the village girls. Aside from strawberry cake, they also have lingonberry cake and apple pie.”

Victorique was still not showing her face, so he was starting to get worried. “Victorique, are you still there? You're so tiny, sometimes I don't know if you're there or not. Ouch! You kicked me again! Which means you're still there. Victorique?” He peeked under the table.

Victorique was still there, a mass of frills with floral patterns crouched under the table, holding something in her tiny hands.

It was white and rectangular. Like a letter.

Kazuya crawled under the table. “What's the matter?”

“I found this here,” Victorique said wearily, pointing at the leg of the table. She still sounded grumpy.

The old round table was splintered and chipped in places, and she had found something in a small tear in the wood.

“Right there? Maybe someone hid it there on purpose. Is it a letter?”

“An envelope. There’s a piece of paper inside.”

“What’s a letter doing here? Maybe it’s a secret mailbox between two people. Though I’m pretty sure you can just hand-deliver letters in this academy. Victorique? Hello?”

Victorique was examining the letter, turning it over and back. She was so focused on it that it didn’t look like she could hear Kazuya.

The sun’s scorching rays were beaming down on the grass and the gazebo’s pointed roof.

“After cleaning the windows, next is the school building. Hmm?”

A freckled girl striding down the corridor of the girls’ dormitory shot a curious look outside the window.

She was wearing a simple yet functional, white-and-blue maid’s uniform, and her hair was kept in place by an unadorned headdress. Holding a mop and bucket in each hand, she was watching a girl walking dejectedly outside.

“Miss Lafitte?” she muttered.

Her signature cream-colored ribbons swayed in the wind. She was carrying a silver birdcage and pulling on a small, shaggy white dog, but what really caught the maid’s attention was the large suitcase. The girl tossed the mop and bucket aside. Lifting her heavy, navy-blue skirt, made of cotton velvet, and plain white petticoat, she ran down the stairs, jumping three steps at a time, her cotton bloomers fully exposed. An older cleaning lady yelped as she passed her on the way.

“Hey, Sophie!” the woman shouted.

“I’m sorry! I’ll be right back!”

“Stop! Where’s your shame?!”

The girl—Sophie—did not wait, of course; she continued running down the stairs and dashed across the lawn with her skirt pulled up.

She caught up to the neatly-dressed girl with the cream-colored ribbon just as she was about to step through the huge iron gate.

“Miss Lafitte! Where are you going?”

Surprised to hear someone calling her name, Miss Lafitte turned around, then regarded the girl in a maid uniform curiously. “Wh-Who might you be?” she asked.

Sophie turned red. “M-My name is Sophie. I-I’m a maid. I’m always at the girls’ dormitory, cleaning.”

“Oh, I remember now.” Miss Lafitte nodded cheerfully. “We passed each other sometimes in the mornings and evenings. You’re the girl who wipes the windows, right?”

“Yes! That’s me!”

“I used to watch you. It looked like you were wiping with such force that the windows might break. So your name is Sophie.”

Sophie nodded, then shared how she was born and raised in the nearby village and that she had started working as a maidservant at St. Marguerite Academy this year.

“I see...”

For some reason, Miss Lafitte looked deep in thought. She then lifted her head and looked Sophie straight in the eyes.

“Sophie, do you like dogs?” she asked.

“What? Yes, I like dogs. My brothers and I had one back home.”

“Then if you don’t mind, can you take care of this little guy?”

Sophie stared back at Miss Lafitte, stunned. She knew how much Miss Lafitte loved this white dog.

“I can’t keep him anymore,” she said tearfully.

“What do you mean? And what’s that huge suitcase for?”

“To tell you the truth, I have to quit school because of my father’s job. We can’t afford the tuition here anymore. So I have to leave with my things before summer break ends.”

“What?!”

“We’ve lost our home, so I have to work now. It will be rough, I’m sure.”

Miss Lafitte began sobbing. Sophie stood still before her, flailing her hands around in panic. She couldn’t think of anything to say to comfort her.

I know!

“If you could wait here a moment, Miss Lafitte.”

Sophie sprinted to the modest staff dormitory located right beside the main gate, where several maids dressed like Sophie came and went. She entered her room on the third floor and carefully pulled out a bag of cookies from a drawer. Grabbing one of the three bags, she waved to Miss Lafitte,

who was looking at her curiously from outside the window. She then ran across the hallway, down the stairs, and back to Miss Lafitte.

“H-Here you go!” She was breathing heavily.

“Wh-What is it?”

“Cookies! My grandma made them using her secret recipe. It’s really good. You can’t get them anywhere else. So, um, they’re precious, but you can have them.”

Sophie blushed again, hanging her head in embarrassment. She thought it was terribly boorish and classless to be giving her grandmother’s cookies to a young noble lady who was worried about her future, knowing it wouldn’t really change anything.

“My grandma’s a great cook, but she’s also a bit superstitious,” Sophie began talking about her grandmother in an effort to hide her embarrassment. “She used to tell me all the time not to go outside on moonless nights, and to always make the sign of the cross when crossing an intersection. Weird, isn’t it? She also told me that if you want to confess something, you should write a letter and hide it where no one can find it, and that would be the same as confessing in a church. I do it secretly sometimes. I have a letter of confession that I hid in this school. And then—”

There was a crunch, and Sophie looked up. Miss Lafitte had stopped crying, happily eating a cookie.

“I-Is it good?”

“It is! Thanks, Sophie. It cheered me up a bit.”

They smiled at each other as if they were old-time friends.

Sophie’s cheeks loosened. She had always admired Miss Lafitte for being neat and so dignified. They might have become good friends if they were classmates, but they were student and maid. They had different social standings, and maids in their uniforms were treated like they weren’t there. No one learned their names or faces. So she gave up on the idea of befriending her.

This is goodbye, but I’m glad I could get close to her in the end. I’ll miss her.

Miss Lafitte gracefully wiped away her tears. “I will continue leading a life I can be proud of, even when I’m alone, even without my father’s support,” she declared. “My social status might change, but I will still be me. I will keep that in mind as I work hard. I...”

“Miss Lafitte!” Sophie started sobbing.

After leaving the puppy with Sophie, Miss Lafitte turned around, pulled on her suitcase, and walked away.

Goodbye, lovely Miss Lafitte.

Sophie sniffed as she hugged the puppy.

A cool breeze blew past between the two.

Victorique and Kazuya crawled out from under the round table in the gazebo and stared at the small white envelope in the bright summer sun.

“Why is there a letter here?” Kazuya wondered. “Wait, Victorique! You can’t just open it!”

Victorique stopped tearing the envelope. She raised her head, giving Kazuya a quizzical look.

Kazuya folded his arms like the prim and proper boy that he was and shook his head.

“It isn’t right,” he said.

“What isn’t right?”

“You shouldn’t open or read private letters, no matter how bored you are, without permission... Hey, were you even listening?!”

Victorique listened only to the first part, sniffed audibly, and resumed opening the envelope. Kazuya immediately took it away from her.

Victorique let out a yelp of genuine surprise, then, with an enigmatic blank expression, watched Kazuya intently.

A faint crease formed between her eyebrows.

Is she mad? Shocked?

Kazuya, not to be outdone, said flatly, “No, you can’t open it. It’s not yours. We have to return it to its owner.”

“Sounds like something you would say.”

“It is. Because I’m right. Let’s go.”

Pulling Victorique’s small hand, Kazuya left the gazebo.

“Where are we going?” Victorique asked.

“To the owner.”

“Hmm?”

Kazuya glanced over his shoulder. Victorique, looking like a gorgeous porcelain doll in her luxurious black dress and floral ornaments, was following him at a trot.

He smiled faintly. “Not the owner, but who it’s addressed to I suppose. The name on the envelope is someone I know. First we’re taking the letter to them. And then we can ask what it’s all about.”

Victorique frowned, a little annoyed. “Fair enough.”

“Right?”

“You’re a real bore, you know that?”

“Oh, sue me!”

Pulling Victorique by the hand, Kazuya headed for the boys’ dormitory. The grain on the walls of the lavish and adorned building, built of oak wood, glistened in the sun.

“Is the dorm mother around?”

Kazuya entered through the small back door and headed straight to the large kitchen behind the dining hall on the first floor. He peeked inside and found the dorm mother, her bright-red hair in a ponytail, holding a cigarette in her mouth and humming to herself. She was wearing a matching red dress that exposed her cleavage. Sweat made her hair stick to her skin.

When the dorm mother noticed Kazuya, she asked sluggishly, “What’s the matter?”

But as soon as she saw Victorique’s face pop out from behind Kazuya, her breath caught. She quickly fixed her hair, buttoned up her dress, then shuffled up to them.

Startled, Victorique took three steps back.

The dorm mother craned her neck, inquisitively studying Victorique from above, below, to the right and left.

“What a lovely young lady!” she remarked. “Are you lost?”

“Um, she’s my friend,” Kazuya said timidly.

“Your friend? Really? Wow.” She sounded disgruntled, for some reason. Then, she gathered herself together. “What a pretty friend you have there. She’s like a walking Grafen Stein doll! Would you like some chocolate cake with raspberry jam, young lady?”

“...Yes,” Victorique replied in an incredibly quiet voice.

She then stood behind Kazuya and grabbed the sleeve of his kimono. The dorm mother looked a little surprised at Victorique’s husky voice. Then she quickly got up, went back into the kitchen, and started boiling chunks of chocolate.

“Uh, Ma’am?” Kazuya called.

“Kujou, melt some butter. And bring me eggs and sugar.”

“Yes, Ma’am. No, wait a minute. Uh, there’s this letter.”

“Keep your hands moving.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I mean...”

While Kazuya was forced to help with making chocolate cake, he told the dorm mother about the letter that they found in the gazebo.

The dorm mother put the ingredients in a bowl. “A letter in a strange spot?” she said, stirring the bowl. “Oh, *that*. There’s this superstitious belief that when you have a confession to make, you write it in a letter and hide it where no one can find it, and it’s like confessing in church.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Of course, nobody does that nowadays. I learned it from my grandmother. Hmm?” The dorm mother inclined her head quizzically as she poured the mixed ingredients into the mold and placed it in the oven. “I think I had this exact same conversation a long time ago.”

“With who?” Victorique, still hiding behind Kazuya’s sleeve—though the ruffles of her dress were peeking out—asked in her low, husky voice.

The dorm mother gave a start. “I’m not sure,” she mumbled fearfully. She thought about it for a moment, then shook her head. “I can’t remember.”

The dorm mother closed the oven and turned around. “Anyway, that letter of confession you found is addressed to me, yes?”

“That’s right.” Kazuya took the letter out of his sleeve pocket and handed it to the dorm mother, who took it suspiciously. “It says ‘To Sophie’.”

“Oh, my.”

Miss Lafitte was leaving through St. Marguerite Academy’s grand, scrollworked gate adorned with golden ornaments, dragging her huge suitcase.

The cream-colored ribbon on her hair swayed in the cool summer breeze.

She looked over her shoulder regretfully. Sophie, her fiery-red hair fluttering in the wind, was watching her anxiously the whole time.

Miss Lafitte let out a heavy sigh.

“I finished it already,” she mumbled with both sorrow and frustration. She tossed the empty bag of cookies away, frowned grimly, and began pondering. “I’m hungry.”

Miss Lafitte had started down the long village road to the station, when she suddenly stopped. “Let’s rethink this,” she murmured gravely. “I bet there are still cookies in that girl’s room. And I’m hungry...”

She turned abruptly and started walking back to the academy, dragging her large suitcase behind her.

The sun was setting, and a cool summer night was approaching. An impatient moon had begun showing its pale and round face in the sky.

The darkness of the night was slowly reigning over the vast campus of St. Marguerite Academy, the light from the moon casting dark shadows all over.

Once back in the academy, the girl placed her luggage on a gazebo in the garden. For a while she was silent, arms crossed in thought, and then she stood up with a nod.

The evening garden was devoid of people and filled with an eerie silence. Water trickling the fountain was starting to sound like an ominous murmur. Grass crunched under small leather shoes.

Soon the girl arrived in front of the staff dormitory building where Sophie’s room was located. She recalled from which window she saw Sophie waving her hand. Right now the light was on inside the room, and she could see what looked like Sophie’s silhouette.

“Okay, let’s do this!”

Miss Lafitte pulled out an item from her luggage and carried it in her arms. After patting her pleated skirt, she started climbing the large tree outside the staff dormitory.

Meanwhile, Sophie was in her room, shoulders sagged dejectedly.

The simple but well-organized room was neat and lovely, decorated with pretty little jars containing small flowers picked from the fields. As she fed the shaggy puppy sitting on the floor, Sophie thought about the immaculate young lady who left it behind.

“I hope Miss Lafitte does fine. She’s so frail. Can she really survive in a ruthless society?” She sighed. “If she was a sharp and clever girl like me, she’d be fine. But she’s so slow.”

“You’re worried too, aren’t you?” she asked the dog, who was lapping up milk.

The sun was already setting outside, and the pale moon was shining through the window. Sophie dreaded this time of the day the most, the strange period in the evening when it felt like things that were not-of-this-world would come out.

Then, as if responding to Sophie’s thoughts, a faint, peculiar sound, like metal grinding against metal, came from somewhere.

Sophie lifted her head and listened carefully.

Creak.

The sound was growing louder and louder.

“What’s that?”

It sounded like it was coming from outside the window. Curious, Sophie half-rose to her feet, when she heard another sound, or what sounded like a voice.

“Papan...”

“What?”

Sophie jumped to her feet and looked around the room.

There was no one inside. The puppy kept drinking its milk.

Sophie opened the door and peered down the hallway. It was empty.

When she returned to her room, she heard the voice again.

“Papan... Papan...”

Sophie shuddered.

The faint, female voice was familiar.

“Papan, come home. Please come home from the war. Papan...”

It’s Miss Lafitte’s voice!

Horrified, Sophie checked the hallway again. No one was there. She turned to the window.

She could still hear the metallic noise, mixed in with the sound of a girl crying.

Sophie dashed to the window and opened it wide. Pale moonlight poured into her small room. Dreadful, eerie, night light. Tangled old branches seemed like black skeletons. She looked around. Her room was on the third floor of the dormitory; Miss Lafitte shouldn’t be outside. But the voice made her call for the girl’s name anyway.

“Miss Lafitte?” Her voice was shaky.

There was no reply.

“Miss Lafitte. What’s wrong? Are you calling for me?”

Still nothing. Sophie suddenly felt a stab in her.

“Who’s there?!” she cried.

There was no answer. Worried, Sophie bolted out of the room and ran down the corridor, the stairs, and out the dormitory.

“Miss Lafitte!” she called from the entrance.

When Sophie returned to her room, wondering why she didn’t see anyone, she sensed something off.

Something had changed.

But she didn’t pass anyone from the time she left until she returned, so no one should have been inside.

Sophie petted the puppy, sat down in the chair, and opened the drawer to have a cookie as she calmed down.

But the bag of cookies was gone!

“Yum! I’ve never had such delicious cookies. I just can’t stop eating.

Oh, no. I’ve already finished them all.”

Meanwhile, in a small gazebo in the garden.

Miss Lafitte was enjoying the cookies she had taken from Sophie’s room. She munched and munched until she ran out, then gave her belly a pat.

“I’m so full.”

For a while she just sat there vacantly.

Her unquestionably immaculate and refined features gradually paled. As she sat there like a bronze statue, Miss Lafitte turned white as a sheet.

She gasped, bolting to her feet. “I was too focused on getting the cookies.” She stirred awkwardly. “Did I perhaps commit a bit of theft?”

She cupped her cheeks, blinking repeatedly. “Oh, no. What do I do?” She stamped her feet several times.

“What have I done? What would my father say if he was still alive? It’s only been an hour or so since I said I was going to lead a life I can be proud of. A lady shouldn’t be stealing things.” She reflected on what she did for a while.

Then suddenly, her eyes lit up. “Right. Sophie told me earlier how to confess when you’ve done something wrong. I think you write your confession in a letter and hide it somewhere where no one can find it. All right.”

Miss Lafitte took out a white paper from her luggage and started writing a letter. She wrote ‘To Sophie’ in small letters on the envelope. After puzzling it over, she shoved the letter into a small hole in the leg of a table in the gazebo.

“Phew.”

She crawled out from under the table, looking exhausted, as though she just finished an arduous task.

“That should do it.”

Miss Lafitte nodded to herself and began repacking her stuff. Pulling her suitcase, she left the gazebo.

She headed for the main gate again, alone in the night.

This time, it was really goodbye to St. Marguerite Academy. Miss Lafitte squinted at the gate’s scrollworked iron fence and gold ornaments, then cast her large eyes down, sullenly twirling her finger around her brown hair adorned with a cream-colored ribbon.

She looked back once, gazing wistfully at the school’s majestic campus as it fell into the black velvet darkness of the night.

Her small lips parted. “Goodbye, St. Marguerite Academy. My beloved school.”

A cold wind blew.

“Goodbye, friends. Goodbye, nice teachers. Goodbye, my puppy.”

Her shoulder-length brown hair fluttered in the breeze.

“And goodbye, lovely maid who showed my utmost kindness at the very end.”

Miss Lafitte sniffled.

“Goodbye, everyone!” she shouted.

She then fixed her round glasses, which were starting to slip off, and walked grandly down the village road.

Soft sobs, quivering shoulders, along with a large suitcase, moved further and further away from the main gate of the academy.

Soon Miss Lafitte’s small figure disappeared into the village, swallowed up by the night.

The wind, a little cold for summer, whistled past.
All that remained was quiet...
...and the sublime campus of the secretive academy, unchanged for the last few centuries.

Summer break at St. Marguerite Academy, where hot wind blew.

In the large kitchen of the boys' dormitory, Victorique and Kazuya were both perched on round chairs in a very similar pose, with their heads cocked to the left, looking up at the red-haired dorm mother—Sophie—who was reading from a letter of confession in front of the oven.

Sophie's freckled, white cheeks were turning red from rage. When she finished reading the letter, she lifted her face, flaming red as her hair, and groaned.

Victorique and Kazuya exchanged glances, wondering what was up with her.

The sweet, savory smell of chocolate cake leaked out of the oven.

Suddenly a woman's jolly footsteps came from somewhere. Someone was coming, prancing down the corridor, occasionally sounding like she stepped on her own foot.

"So-So-Sophie!" They barged into the kitchen, calling out the red-haired dorm mother's name in a singsong voice. "Can I borrow some money? I've already spent all my salary! I want to buy a new blouse in Saubreme... Hmm? Kujou, Victorique?!"

It was their homeroom teacher, Ms. Cecile. She quickly fixed her big round glasses. "I-I didn't say anything."

"So you know the dorm mother?" Kazuya asked.

Ms. Cecile nodded as she fumbled with her glasses. "That's right. Sophie has been working here at the academy since my student days. We've always been good friends. Right, Sophie?"

Kazuya turned towards the dorm mother. Victorique had her eyes fixed on her the whole time.

Clutching the letter, the dorm mother was shaking her fist. Ms. Cecile studied her curiously, and when she noticed the letter, her eyes widened.

"Thank you for the letter," the dorm mother said. "After six years, I finally received it, Cecile. No, Miss Lafitte. Or should I call you Cecile the Thief?!"

“Wh-What?! H-How could you say that in front of students? This is inexcusable!”

“Inexcusable? That’s my line!”

The dorm mother tossed the letter aside, lifted the hem of her bright-red dress with both hands, revealing her long, fine legs, and lunged at Ms. Cecile.

“What are you so angry about?” Ms. Cecile cried, running around the table. “And could you save it for later? My students are watching! My dignity!”

“Dignity, my foot! You brazen thief! ‘Did I perhaps commit a bit of theft?’ No, that was clear, plain burglary! Lead a life you can be proud of? You sure got me! Hey, get back here!”

“I’ll borrow money later!”

The dorm mother stamped her feet. “I’m not lending you a cent! I mean it!”

In the academy’s humid garden, flowers swayed in the summer breeze, and the small creek murmured occasionally.

The gazebo’s pointed roof cast a pitch-black shadow on the green grass. In the distance the heat haze blurred the summer landscape.

Ms. Cecile sat on the bench in the gazebo. “It was a very rough summer,” she mumbled, fiddling with her round glasses.

Kazuya, who had followed her, was standing before her, nodding. Ms. Cecile cast her large eyes down as she recalled the summer break six years ago—a very cool summer.

“It was 1918, the year the Great War ended. My father was missing in action, we lost all our properties, and suddenly I was an orphan. So I had to leave my beloved school before the summer break ended.”

With a wistful look in her eyes, Ms. Cecile shared the story of the red-haired maid who chased her as she was dragging her suitcase through the front gate. And how the cookies she gave her as a parting gift were so delicious, and how the deliciousness of the cookies helped ease her anxiety and sadness about what was to come. And then she wanted more, and she couldn’t resist stealing them. Regretting what she had done, she wrote a letter of confession and hid it in this gazebo.



“So what happened to you after that?” Kazuya asked.

Ms. Cecile smiled. “My father’s properties were gone, but he made it back from the war in one piece. He provided just enough tuition so I could graduate from here. Then I returned as a teacher.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“A fond memory, thinking back.” She smiled softly, and in a voice tinged with sorrow, added, “An eternal summer break.”

“Stealing is bad, though.” Kazuya remarked, ruining her reverie.

Caught completely off-guard, Ms. Cecile went quiet.

The wind blew.

The grass, petals, stirred.

“Am I a bore?” Kazuya asked worriedly.

Ms. Cecile snapped back to reality. “Did you say something?”

“I-It’s nothing.” Kazuya shook his head. “So you’ve been friends with the dorm mother ever since then, huh?”

“Yup.” Ms. Cecile nodded happily. “Ever since I returned to the academy. But lately I’ve been thinking. Even if Sophie and I had gone our separate ways, we would have met again somewhere, and we would have become friends.”

“I see.”

“I’m sure of it. I believe someday, somewhere, you will reunite with the friends you really care about.”

For some reason her words reminded Kazuya of Victorique, whom he had left in the dorm kitchen. He bid the teacher goodbye and left the gazebo, strolling down the path that led to the boys’ dormitory.

Water trickled down the fountain. Gigantic clouds were adrift in the boundless, blue summer sky.

Gravel crunched under Kazuya’s every step.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen of the boys’ dormitory.

The chocolate cake was almost done, its fragrant aroma wafting through the kitchen. Victorique, sitting on a round chair and watching the dorm mother warily from a distance, was sniffing the air, her small, pretty nose twitching in anticipation.

“It’s still a mystery to me,” the red-haired dorm mother muttered to no one in particular as she whipped some fresh cream to coat the cake with.

“...”

“How in the world did Cecile steal the cookies?”

“...”

“I remember that night well. It was very strange, after all. I remember hearing her crying outside the third-floor window, but when I went outside, there was no one there. And when I returned to my room, the cookies were gone. There was no one outside the window, and I didn’t pass her in the hallway or at the entrance. How did she steal them, then?”

Victorique shifted in her chair. “It’s burning,” she said in a faint, barely-audible voice. She pointed at the oven with her little forefinger, rocking her body anxiously. “The cake... is going... to burn.”

“Argh, I really wanna know!” Distracted, the dorm mother kept sighing, oblivious to the slightly unpleasant aroma that began emanating from the oven.

“...”

“Aaaah!”

“...”

“How did she do it?!”

“...”

Victorique looked to be on the verge of tears. Her gaze flitted to the corridor in search of Kazuya. But he still hadn’t returned.

“That scoundrel,” she growled.

The dorm mother looked at Victorique. “Hmm? Did you say something, little girl?”

“Very well,” Victorique mumbled softly. “I’ll explain it briefly,” she reluctantly began. “Or else the cake will get burnt.”

“What?”

The dorm mother eyed the tiny Victorique curiously. Her hands never stopped furiously stirring the cream.

Victorique yawned. “First, Cecile’s voice that you heard outside the window.”

“Oh?”

“You heard a girl’s voice from outside the third-floor window and a metallic creaking, yes?”

“I did.”

“Try to remember. Cecile was carrying a certain object. I believe she climbed a nearby tree and hung that on a branch.”

“What certain object?”

“A silver birdcage,” Victorique said wearily. She stretched like a little black cat. “Cecile climbed a tree and hung the birdcage on a branch. It creaked every time the wind blew.”

“Why would she do that?”

“You said it yourself. Cecile had a parrot.”

“Hmm?” Sophie cocked her head.

Worried about the oven, Victorique went on. “Cecile had a puppy and a parrot. Parrots are birds that mimic human voices. The voice you heard outside the window was the parrot mimicking Cecile’s voice. ‘Papan, come home. Please come home from the war.’ She was probably saying that in her sleep, and the parrot picked it up.”

“I see...” Sophie looked a little sad. But when she remembered the stolen cookies again, her face turned dark. “But how did she get into my room? There was no one in the hallway, or at the front door, and there’s no other way inside.”

“She was invisible,” Victorique said nonchalantly. “You said so yourself. No one bothers to learn the names and faces of maids. If you walk down the corridor in a maid’s uniform, everyone will think you’re a maid, and you will be ignored like you were invisible. That’s why Cecile was unaware of your existence until you called her. Cecile probably did the same to you.”

Sophie’s mouth was agape.

“Think,” Victorique went on. “There was no girl who looked like Miss Lafitte in the hallway. But there must have been one girl in a maid’s uniform walking around in a magical cloak that rendered her invisible in the staff’s dormitory. Do you get it now?”

For a while the dorm mother just gaped at Victorique. Then, as though coming to her senses, she stood up, opened the oven, and took out a fluffy, delicious-looking chocolate cake.

Victorique’s cold, expressionless face stirred a little.

As the dorm mother poured the whipped cream over the cake, a white, shaggy dog burst in.

Victorique yelped. The white dog wagged its tail, eyes glistening as it stared at the dorm mother’s hand, expecting a share of the cake.

“Is this the dog from back then?” Victorique asked.

“Yes.”





“The puppy didn’t make a sound even when an intruder stole your cookies. It’s proof that Cecile was the culprit.”

“Ah, now that you mention it,” the dorm mother mumbled, looking up.

Victorique’s icy, expressionless little face seemed to twitch. A brief, faint change. “You didn’t suspect her in the slightest.”

“I didn’t,” the dorm mother said in a somewhat carefree voice. “She was precious to me.”

Kazuya finally returned. The dorm mother placed a piece of cake in front of the boy as well.

“Only women and children eat sweet food like this, not me,” he grumbled.

Victorique stabbed his side with a fork, shutting his mouth.

Reluctantly, he took a bite. *Oh?* He took another one.

Victorique was chewing her food with undivided attention.

The sun was slowly setting outside. The seemingly never-ending summer break was going by, slowly but surely.

“Stop poking me, Victorique. It hurts.”

“Hmph.”

“You should listen to others sometimes.”

A cool summer.

One day six years ago, summer break at St. Marguerite Academy.

In a small, tidy room in the staff dormitory, a red-haired maid was looking up at the moon, her elbow propped on the window sill and her cheeks resting on her hand.

A white puppy was playing at her feet.

Sophie had changed from her stuffy, navy-blue maid’s uniform into a white-and-blue checkered nightwear. Her fiery-red hair was tucked into a round hat of the same pattern, with the rest hanging down her neck.

Moonlight shone on the little maid sitting sad and pensive by the window.

There was no one else around.

Just the moon and the girl.

“Miss Lafitte,” she mumbled, dropping her gaze. “I don’t think I’ll ever see her again.”

Pearly tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

“Good luck. Wherever you are, I hope you hang in there..”

Only the moon heard the little maid's melancholic wish.
A cool summer.
The night was slowly wearing on.

“Sophie...”

The train to Saubreme was slowly moving away from the village in the darkness of the night, billowing black smoke.

In a crowded corner of a third-class carriage, Cecile was sitting curled up with her suitcase and a silver birdcage with a parrot inside.

I'm full and sleepy, she thought. I might've eaten a little too much.

The image of the maid who saw her off with tears in her eyes came back to her mind. She thought that if she had been able to stay in the academy, she would have become friends with the girl. She couldn't get Sophie's bright eyes out of her mind.

“Goodbye, red-haired Sophie. Thank you for crying for me.”

The train crossed the railway bridge with a whistle so loud that the whole carriage shook. The darkness of the night seemed to creep into the car from the corner of the closed window.

Lonely and anxious, Cecile bit her lip.

“I hope we see each other again.”

She closed her eyes to sleep.

The train's whistle drowned out her soft murmur.

“I'm sure we'll become good friends.”



The train, heading toward the capital of Saubreme, made it across the railway bridge, running further and further away from the academy.

Chapter 4: Summer Phantom

A humid and scorching summer evening.

St. Marguerite Academy.

The yellow rays of the midsummer sun were falling on the huge, U-shaped school building. The colorful flowers in the flowerbeds, the white fountain, the green grass all swayed in the hot breeze under the evening sky.

High above the vast garden, white clouds towered like snow, casting black shadows on the lawn and school building.

It was the middle of summer at St. Marguerite, a nearly-deserted school where most of the students had gone on vacation with their families for the summer.

“Why won’t you come in?” the boy asked in a smooth, but slightly accented French.

The boy—Kazuya Kujou—peeked out the hallway from his room on the second floor of the boys’ dormitory, a grand, lavishly-decorated building made of oak, standing in a corner of the academy.

“That’s not a place to sit in,” he added. There was exasperation in his kind, jet-black eyes. “That’s the hallway, where people walk.”

An audible sniff came from the hallway, near the floor.

“Victorique.”

“Shut up, Kujou,” said a peculiar voice, low, melancholic, and husky like an old woman’s. “I like it here. Now leave me alone.”

“Man, you’re like a stubborn old lady. Ouch! Stop kicking me! Please, for the love of god, don’t kick me with your boots. It really hurts!”

The petite girl sitting on the floor just outside the door to Kazuya’s room, leaning against the wall with her chin lifted arrogantly, exhaled sharply.

Kazuya let out a sigh. “Fine. You never listen to anyone. You just do what you want to do.”

“Of course.”

“...”

The girl—Victorique de Blois—snorted again.

Today she was wearing a chic black-and-white plaid dress, a snow-white headdress on her head, and glossy enamel boots on her feet. For some reason, she was sitting in the cold corridor of the boys' dormitory, reading a thick, brown leather-bound book, boredly but with incredible speed. Her long, magnificent golden hair hung down to the floor like a strand of fine silk threads, glistening around her tiny frame.

"I'm glad you came to hang out because you're bored," Kazuya said, "but why did you stop right outside my room and sit down in the hallway?"

"Because the hallway is colder."

Kazuya looked back at his room. Luxurious oak furniture, a desk, cabinet, and a bed. Fancy gobelin curtains hung over the French windows facing the garden, and a long, high-quality fur carpet covered the floor.

He glanced at the soft carpet in his room and the cold, wooden floor in the hallway. He went back inside, took something out of the desk drawer, and returned with a small paulownia box. He brought it close to Victorique's small, pretty nose, hitting her long, curly eyelashes.

"What?" Victorique growled, not even lifting her gaze.

"You'll have to see for yourself." Kazuya opened the lid of the box.

Victorique cast a tired glance at it and gasped. Her emerald eyes, filled with tedium, arrogance, and weariness, widened.

Inside the box were small, round candies of various colors—red, green, yellow. Delicately crafted, they looked like sparkling glass beads.

Victorique's glossy cherry lips were partly open as she marveled at the candies. Kazuya grinned. He picked one up with his fingers and popped it into Victorique's mouth.

A faint smile appeared on Victorique's expressionless face. Or at least it seemed like it. It could've just been his imagination.

"Sweet," Victorique mumbled.

"Well, it's candy, after all. Do you like it? Ruri... I mean, my sister sent these to me. You remember her, right? She gave you the light-blue kimono last spring. When I wrote to her that I had a little female friend, she thought you were actually a small child. So she sent some candies for kids..."

Victorique was vigorously, viciously, munching on the candy that Kazuya threw in her mouth. Whether she was listening to a word he was saying was a mystery. She moved her tiny, pudgy fingers to pick up candy

balls from the small box and tossed them in her mouth, munching away. She licked and munched, licked and munched, finishing them in no time at all.

She looked up at the dumbfounded Kazuya. “Is there any more?”

“N-No, that’s it. Sorry.”

Victorique suddenly lost interest in Kazuya and returned to her book. Her behavior left him crestfallen.

“Speaking of which,” Kazuya said, “my sister sent a very long letter along with the kimono. Apparently, she had a fight with my father and brothers because she wanted to become a teacher after graduating from school. My father was planning to marry her off to an Imperial Army officer, my oldest brother’s schoolmate, but they’re ten years apart. Plus the guy has a square face and a thick beard. My sister hates him.”

“...”

“It doesn’t look like you’re the least bit interested. Oh, she also mentioned a strange incident. Some Chinese vase suddenly disappeared from the roof of a department store.”

“Speak.”

“Uh, right away.”

Kazuya straightened himself. Noticing Victorique looking up and waiting impatiently, he scurried back to the room, searched through the drawers for his sister’s letter, and returned with a thick bundle of letters.

Victorique’s eyes widened. “We might be here for a while.”

“Yeah,” Kazuya agreed. “The first half is mostly just her bad-mouthing my father and brother. My sister is smart, strong-willed, and much more assertive than I am. All right. I’m reading it.”

“Go ahead.”

Standing near the door, Kazuya straightened his back, then began reading his sister’s letter swiftly to the little clump of frills that sat at his feet.

“Dear Kazuya. How are you? It’s me, your adorable sister. Get this. Father is so mean. And your brothers as well. How are they mean, you ask?”

Kazuya’s soft voice reverberated throughout the empty dormitory. Outside the window, the summer sun was shining brightly, illuminating the

grass in the garden, the white fountain, the colorful flowerbeds. The water trickling down the fountain like melting ice were refreshing to the ears.

A small white bird soared into the summer sky.

It was a humid, hot summer in the mountains of Western Europe. Like two small dots in the landscape, Victorique and Kazuya were the only ones left in the academy.

We turn the clock back a little to spring of the same year.

Across the ocean in the Orient Seas, far from the kingdom of Sauville tucked in a corner of Western Europe, was a small island nation nestled between the vast Pacific Ocean and the grand Chinese continent.

Spring had just recently arrived, driving away the cold winter that chilled the imperial capital, bathing the city in a warm sunlight.

In a room in an old, but well-maintained wooden school building at the Seian Girls' School, a prestigious teaching institution in the suburbs of the city, third-year student Kujou Ruri was hanging her head.

She was a beautiful, eye-catching oriental girl with a graceful body, glossy black hair that cascaded down her back, and large, moist, jet-black eyes reminiscent of a black cat. Like the other female students around her, she was dressed in a *hakama* and a gorgeous pink-and-orange plaid kimono, but unlike the other girls who tied their hair in ribbons or wore them in fluffy, fashionable buns, she simply let her black hair hang down naturally, giving her a somewhat wild look.

Ruri, with her beautiful, mature features, was looking out the window with her elbow on the desk, while the glamorous girls around her—her entourage, it seemed—were brushing her hair with a red comb, stuffing sweets in her mouth, and dusting off her *hakama*.

Paying no heed to the girls, Ruri kept sighing.

The girls exchanged looks.

“I wonder what’s wrong with Lady Ruri,” one whispered. “She looks so down lately. It’s weird.”

“It’s like half of her soul is leaving her body.”

“I know what’s up. Her brother.”

Their pretty faces scrunched up all at once.

“That little...” one snarled.

“What was his name again? Kazuo? Kazushi?”

“It’s Kazuya. Kazuya Kujou. He’s two years younger than her. He went to a military academy. You know, the plain-looking one.”

“The one with the average looks, despite being Lady Ruri’s brother.”

“Curse you, Kazuya.”

“He had Lady Ruri all to himself for so long. She even made his lunches.”

“Curse you, Kazuya.”

“I think he suddenly left for a faraway country in Europe to study. Lady Ruri was crying as she begged him to stay, but he kicked her and left laughing. Men are so horrible!”

“Curse you, Kazuya.”

“Curse you, Kazuya.”

“I hate him so much.”

The girls’ chorus echoed throughout the wooden school building like some kind of malicious incantation. Not that they needed to lay a curse on him, when he was being treated like the Grim Reaper in a faraway land. They didn’t know that, of course.

Whether she heard them or not, Ruri, who had been like a puppet without a soul since her brother’s departure, rose to her feet absently, grabbed her leather bag, and left the classroom without a word to her friends.

Ruri was walking dejectedly down the old but spotless corridor, which had been polished to a high shine by generations of schoolgirls.

Ah, I’m so bored...

A sigh spilled from her glossy, red lips.

Every day is so dull without anyone to poke fun at, tease, or dote on.

Letting out another sigh, she thought about her little brother who had left for a distant foreign country. Whenever she spotted a student wearing the black uniform of the military academy pass by on the street outside, she couldn’t help but look closely. But none of them looked anything like her adorable little brother, leaving Ruri disappointed every single time.

I miss him so much.

While walking down the corridor, she passed by Ms. Fuyou, a young female teacher. Dressed in a stylish Western-style outfit, she was quite the fashionable lady, with her black hair cut short in a modern style.

Ruri stopped in her tracks. "Good morning," she said.

"Ah, Kujou. Good morning." Ms. Fuyou returned her greeting with a smile. Ruri had excelled at her studies ever since attending this school. "Oh, actually. May I have a moment of your time?"

"S-Sure."

Ruri followed Ms. Fuyou to the teachers' office. It was bright inside.

"Please take a seat on the couch over there."

"Okay..."

Ruri sat down a little nervously as the teacher served her ruby-colored tea and biscuits. On the pretty round table lay this morning's paper. It bore a sensational headline: **Mysterious Cloaked Man Steals Another Painting!**

As Ruri skimmed the article, Ms. Fuyou sat down on the couch across from her.

"Kujou," the teacher said, tilting her head. Her hair, cut around her chin, swayed. "You're an outstanding student, and very popular and trusted among the students as well."

The sudden compliment made Ruri blush. "Thank you."

"What are your plans after graduating this year?"

"...What?"

"Most of the students' families have already decided where they will marry, but I haven't heard anything from you."

"Uhm..." Ruri bit her lip.

For the past six months, Ruri had been so depressed thinking about her brother that she had completely forgotten that the time for her to decide her future was approaching.

"I, um... I'm not really fond of men in general. I-I don't think I want to marry..."

While giving a garbled answer, all Ruri could think about was her father and brothers.

Three large men suddenly burst into laughter. They start wrestling out of nowhere, rolling around in the corridor, and then falling into the garden, dragging Kazuya as he happens to pass by. The *shishi-odoshi* breaks, and the whole house shakes like an earthquake just struck. They glance at Ruri and Kazuya, who are eating dinner slowly, savoring the food, while asking for another helping, one of them bragging about how it's their third one already.

Ugh, the chills... I can't believe we're the same species. They're hairy, with square jaws...

“Sounds like you really hate men.”

“I-I do...”

“In that case, there's one option I'd like you to consider.” What she said next shocked Ruri. “How about becoming a teacher here after you graduate? It's a new age, with lots of western culture and different mindsets coming in. I think students and teachers should learn new things together. You came to mind since you have an excellent academic record, and you're popular among the students. You're suited for a teaching position.”

For a while, Ruri just stared at the teacher in puzzlement. Then eventually her face lit up.

I never thought of that!

It felt like the road up ahead just opened wide.

“I'll go home and talk to my father and brothers about it,” she said.

Ruri left the instructor's office in high spirits.

Spring in the imperial capital was sunny, and a little restless, filled with falling cherry blossoms and the loud, roaring cars, which were popular these days.

Glancing at her schoolmates being driven home by uniformed drivers in black cars, Ruri jumped on her favorite bicycle and rode off gallantly. Her long, untied black hair and the navy blue hem of her *hakama* fluttered in the spring breeze.

As she turned a corner, ringing her bicycle bell, she saw a young man running toward her from a brick Western-style building. He was dressed in a casual kimono and stylish *geta*. He looked to be about twenty years old, with handsome features. But for some reason, he was carrying a large, square object wrapped in a cloth.

“Oops!”

Ruri yelped, quickly applying the brakes.

The young man tried to apologize, but when he saw Ruri's face, his eyes widened in shock.

“Wh-What is it?” Ruri asked.

“Wow. You're quite pretty. What's your name? I'm Kira. I'm Kira Yoshinosuke.”

His compliment was so straightforward. An innocent schoolgirl would have blushed from embarrassment, but Ruri was preoccupied with her brother and her future.

“I don’t give my name to strangers,” she said flatly.

She mounted her bicycle and dashed away, leaving behind the handsome, gaping young man carrying a square-shaped cloth.

“I see. Your sister met a handsome young man on her way home,” Victorique said, yawning widely, not even trying to hide her boredom.





Kingdom of Sauville, far across the sea. In the deserted, second-floor corridor of a boys' dormitory, standing in a majestic academy nestled among the mountains.

Apart from Kazuya leaning against the door reading a long letter and Victorique sitting on the floor yawning repeatedly, there was no sign of anyone else in the dormitory.

"When does the vase appear and disappear?" Victorique asked.

"Just wait a bit. There's one more not-handsome person showing up after this. It'll be a little while before the vase disappears."

"Then read it quickly."

"Yeah, yeah."

Back in the small island country in the Orient, across the distant sea. We turn the clock back again to warm spring, evening of the same day.

The Kujou family lived in a quiet residential area on the western edge of the capital. Although Ruri's dedicated entourage included the daughters of viscounts and high-ranking persons of society, her own family did not hold any noble status, only the renown of a warrior family with a somewhat distinguished history.

The Kujou family's manor had the atmosphere of an old samurai residence, with jet-black roof tiles and a large, rugged gate. A nameplate bearing the name **Kujou** painted by her father in ostentatious letters hung on the absurdly huge gatepost.

Ruri sighed as she recalled the Western-style mansion, the chinaware, and the art nouveau furniture that she loved so much when she visited the home of the viscount's daughter.

This house is like my father and brothers' personality materialized. Huge, boorish, overbearing. Tsk. I wish we had art nouveau too...

Remembering that she had to discuss her future plans today, Ruri braced herself. Or in the words of her father, *tighten your loin cloth*.

As Ruri opened the sliding door at the entrance, took off her zori, and stepped into the long corridor of the samurai residence, which was dim despite it still being dusk, a dark face, square and bearded and ghastly, suddenly appeared.

Ruri made a strange sound, like a hen about to be strangled by a farmer. The huge, unfamiliar man looked around in search of the voice, then

lowered his head and peered far down into Ruri's porcelain, doll-like face, beautiful and refined.

"Apologies!" the man roared. His voice seemed to shake the very air itself.

Ruri leapt back with a horrified shriek, slamming the back of her head against the corridor wall, and swayed unsteadily. The huge man watched her blankly, then finding her reaction amusing, he threw his head back and guffawed.

Ruri jumped. The man was dressed in the familiar uniform of an imperial army officer—a cap bearing a shiny insignia, a filthy khaki cloak, and a large Japanese sword at his waist. He looked much like his father and brothers, but twice as large. His thick beard was not normal.

"E-E-Excuse me!" Ruri squealed.

She was so shaken that her voice cracked. She then bolted down the hallway, trying to get as far away as possible from the man.

"I'm marrying that man?!" Ruri, sitting with one knee up in her father's study, shrieked.

Her father was silently tugging at his handlebar mustache like an elite soldier. Then suddenly he pulled out a folding fan from his pocket and slapped Ruri's knee with it.

"Ouch!"

"A young woman shouldn't be sitting like that. Have you no shame? Fix your posture!"

"No! I hate you!" Ruri objected instantly.

Taken aback, her father turned to the side. "Odd," he whispered. "Kazuya would have immediately listened. I have no idea how to deal with this girl..."

"Did you say something?"

"Don't be so grumpy. You're ruining the pretty face you got from your mother."

"..."

"Just calm down and listen. The man you met in the hallway is Mushanokouji. Don't you remember him? He was Yasuhiro's best friend in the military academy."

Silence fell. Ruri's father, the backbone of the Kujou family and a key personnel in the army, looked fearfully and saw his daughter pouting,

wearing a scowl.

“Ruri? Miss Ruri? I can’t read her face either...”

Stressful events flashed rapidly through Ruri’s mind.

Back when she was younger, whenever she was playing house or studying with her adorable younger brother Kazuya, her brother Yasuhiro, who was ten years older than her, and his friends, would sometimes ruin the quiet and peaceful atmosphere.

When they were students, they would gather in her brother’s room night after night to drink and make merry, engage in heated debates about the future of the country, and play with Kazuya, who just happened to be walking down the corridor, lifting him up in the air and then dropping him, resulting in injuries. They would get drunk and sing, arms around each other’s shoulders, laughing at obscene stories. Ruri would often break out in painful rashes in the middle of the night.

One time one of his brother’s friends lifted her up in the air, rubbing her head, saying, “Is this your sister? So adorable!” and Ruri shouted, “I hate you!” which earned her an earful from her brother.

Once the memories subsided, Ruri felt dizzy.

“I will not marry a stranger who is ten years older than me.”

“He seemed eager, though.”

“What?!”

“Yasuhiro promised to give you to him if he doesn’t find a wife. He warned him that you were unruly, but he said he didn’t mind at all. Your brother wants to finalize things before the man changes his mind. You’re already seventeen. You’re getting on. It doesn’t matter to whom, just get married. I believe Yutaka said the same thing.”

Yutaka was her second eldest brother, a rather peculiar man with a large build whose hobby was inventing things. Right now he was in the middle of some kind of experiment using an electric generator in the back room; sometimes the sound of something exploding, the smell of burning flesh, and the sound of him coughing violently reached all the way to the study.

“F-Father.”

Ruri stood up and took a power stance. The sadness and anger she had bottled up inside made her black hair rise. Her father’s handlebar mustache quivered.

“A-Actually, I was asked today if I would be interested in becoming a teacher at the school,” Ruri said nervously. “They said a new age would mean new things to learn and teach.”

Her father sniffed audibly. “Women need not bother themselves with these things. I will tell the school myself that you’re not interested.”

Tears formed in Ruri’s eyes. “I won’t listen to brawny men who just marry someone without their consent!” Her voice was trembling from rage and sorrow.

Not wanting to show her tears, Ruri lifted up a stone bookend. Suddenly sorrow overpowered rage, and she threw the bookend, causing thick dictionaries to fall to the floor.

“Stop that, you rampaging maniac!” Her father snapped. “Ow!”

Ruri stormed out of the study.

That night.

Ruri was at her desk, sobbing in frustration. Her father and brothers were in the large room in the middle of the samurai residence, having a drinking party with their guest Mushanokouji. It sounded like Ruri’s marriage was already settled; her family was telling the guest to take care of Ruri, asking him to discipline her well, and how the first step was the most important for women.

Ruri was shaking as she clutched a pen. She was writing a long letter to Kazuya at this very moment.

“Dear Kazuya. How are you? It’s me, your adorable sister. Get this. Father is so mean. And your brothers as well. How are they mean, you ask?”

The more she wrote, the more she became frustrated, and she started writing down every single detail.

When she shared how she was asked about becoming a teacher, she remembered that Kazuya was in Europe. If she were to become a teacher, she wanted to wear western clothing, so she made a shopping list.

“I want three blouses made of white cotton. With cute collars. And a checkered collar. Leather shoes, dark brown, with accessories on the tips. Socks with embroidery and a glass pen. And ink, of course. And, uh...”

Thinking about pretty things somehow calmed her down, which also reminded her about the letter that Kazuya sent. It mentioned that he had made a little friend. So she decided to send something in return for the stuff she wanted Kazuya to buy, a nice light-blue kimono that she used to wear when she was younger.

I think it's in storage... There was also a pink obi I'm sure.

Ruri walked down the dark hallway and opened the sliding door to the storage room. She flicked on the miniature light bulb. Then, as she reached the top of the shelf and stood on her tiptoes, it suddenly turned dark.

A huge shadow was blocking the light from the lamp. A large man with a beard. It was Mushanokouji. His shadow loomed over Ruri, and she froze in fear.

Mushanokouji smiled at her. "Is this what you wanted?"

"I don't need any help. I can get it myself."

She tried to refuse his help, but his hand was already on the kimono.

"Thank you," Ruri said bitterly.

"Don't mention it!"

Mushanokouji turned to leave, but then stopped. His gaze went down to the kimono in Ruri's hands.

"Miss Ruri," he gasped. "That kimono..."

"Yes?"

"Uh, never mind. It's nothing."

Mushanokouji's square, bearded face turned red for some reason, and he left the storage room in a hurry, plodding down the corridor.

"The vase, Kujou! The vase!"

"Ow, ow, ow! Stop it, Victorique. You're like the rampaging maniac around here. I can't take it anymore!"

Back in Sauville, a kingdom in Western Europe, far away in a foreign land.

In the second-floor corridor of the empty boys' dormitory at the majestic academy, Victorique, her rosy cheeks puffed out in anger, was kicking Kazuya's shin with her tiny, enamel boots.

Kazuya jumped up and dashed into his room. Victorique, having decided that the cold corridor floor was where she belonged, did not try to enter

Kazuya's room, even for a moment, as if there was some kind of invisible barrier there.

"The vase," Victorique muttered in a low, husky voice tinged with sadness. "I'm bored."

Kazuya had taken refuge by his desk, rubbing his sore shin.

"It's gonna show up after this," he said.

"It better disappear right away."

"It will, as soon as it appears. You're such a handful, you know that? If my sister sends me more candy, you're not getting any."

Victorique's eyes widened in surprise, and her glossy, cherry lips started quivering.

"I'm sorry," Kazuya quickly added. "I didn't mean that. I'll give you some, so don't give me that look. I call foul!" He sighed. "I'll continue reading, then. That weekend, my sister and her schoolmates went to the biggest department store in the city."

The Matsuyama Department Store, standing in the center of the zelkova-lined street, was the most popular store for ladies and gentlemen in the imperial capital, with its large selection of goods and luxurious atmosphere.

On the weekend, Ruri invited one of her followers, the daughter of a high-class family, to go window shopping with her to distract herself.

Leaving their attendants to wait in front of the department store, Ruri and the girl entered hand-in-hand. Short-haired salestaff in stylish western clothing showed them new stationery and sash clips.

"It's you," came a sudden man's voice.

Ruri, gleefully studying the items, glanced up and saw a familiar, handsome young man standing there. She gave him a puzzled look.

"It's Kira," he said. "Don't you remember? This is the second time I've seen you this week. What a coincidence!"

"Right..."

"Man, it's not every day you get to meet a pretty lass." He sounded frustrated. "Unfortunately, I'm in a bit of a hurry. Truly a shame!" He then disappeared somewhere.

"Who was that?" Ruri's friend asked.

"No clue."

While they stood there looking baffled, a staff called to them.

“An exhibition of rare Chinese works of art has just opened in the top-floor hall. Would you ladies like to see it?”

Ruri and the girl exchanged glances. They decided to check it out, so they took the elevator to the top floor.

Chinese kimonos, furniture, and large vases were neatly arranged in the hall. Upon noticing Ruri’s friend, an executive from the department store immediately rushed to her to greet her courteously. Ruri and the girl slowly made their way around the hall. Each item on display was apparently an important cultural asset that sold for astronomical prices.

“Incredible,” Ruri breathed. “Right? Huh?”

Ruri looked over her shoulder, and was stunned.

Her friend had tripped, and a vase was falling.

The vase tumbled, and so did her friend. Her fall looked like it would result in a serious injury. Ruri had always been coordinated; when she was younger, her mother would lock her younger brother in the storehouse as punishment, but Ruri would climb over the outer wall to toss rice balls through the window far above. Ruri hesitated for a moment. Then she ignored the vase, leapt and took flight, spreading her arms out to catch her precious schoolmate.

“Lady Ruri!” the careless girl exclaimed, deeply moved.

The sound of something breaking came from behind.

Fearfully Ruri looked over her shoulder. The vase was split in half.

Oh, no!

Ruri and her friend were hidden behind the kimonos on display in the hall so no one could see them.

“What do we do?” Ruri asked as she helped the girl up.

She picked up the broken vase and put it back in its place, assembling the pieces together.

At first glance, the vase seemed to be back to normal. But it quivered with even the slightest vibrations.

I don’t care about myself, but she can’t be involved in this. If word gets out that someone from an esteemed family broke a Chinese vase, there will be some serious trouble. I have to get her out of here without drawing attention.

Ruri pulled on the girl’s hand, dragging her away from the vase.

If they find it, I'll just say I broke it. Ah, they might ask me to pay a ridiculous amount for damages. What will happen to my family then?

The vase looked like it would split in half and fall again at any moment. Ruri headed for the hall's exit, pulling the stumbling girl along.

After arriving at the ground floor of the department store and helping the girl into the car prepared for her by her attendants, Ruri breathed a sigh of relief.

The sun had completely set, and it was dark outside. As Ruri stood there, taking in the night breeze, she heard footsteps approaching.

She turned around and spotted the handsome young man, Kira, carrying a large package wrapped in a cloth like last time. As Ruri watched him, Kira noticed her and raised one hand, before hurrying away across the sidewalk.

Hearing people abuzz behind her, Ruri turned around. Apparently there had been some sort of incident.

She shuddered. *Do they know about the vase?*

She listened closely.

“A phantom appeared.”

Ruri frowned, baffled.

Doesn't sound like it.

“A phantom in a black cape appeared, flew through the air, and then vanished.”

Wh-What?

Ruri was about to walk away, thinking that the case had nothing to do with her, when she heard the word ‘vase’. She quickly jumped into the midst of the gossipers.

“Excuse me,” she said. “What's this about a vase?”

Ruri learned that after she and her friend left, the lights suddenly went out in the hall on the top floor, and a phantom wearing a black cloak appeared. After stealing a Chinese vase, it fled through the window, escaping from the security, and quickly made its way to the rooftop.

The phantom then flew through the air, cloak flaring, and vanished.

What does that even mean?

Ruri wore a perplexed look as she moved away from the department store.

It's not humanly possible to fly into the night sky from a rooftop. And as for the vase they stole, it was already broken. Did we just break the vase that they were planning to steal? Hmm...

As she was mulling the incident over, she bumped into the person she least wanted to see on the back street. A big, bearded army officer. *I think his name was Mushanokouji, or something like that.*

“Ah, Ruri-san,” Mushanokouji greeted with a smile.

Ruri frowned. Stars twinkled in the night sky, and the wind was a bit chilly. Ruri’s black hair fluttered in the wind. Mushanokouji squinted. He still had the same beard and square face. The banner hanging on the wall of the department rippled along with Ruri’s hair.

“What a coincidence,” the man said. “Were you out shopping?”

Ruri frowned. She was about to leave right away, but the problem that was currently occupying her mind was bothering her, so she couldn’t help but speak.

“There seems to be some sort of commotion about a phantom in the Matsuyama Department Store. It’s like something out of a novel. Isn’t that intriguing?”

“A phantom? Novel?” Mushanokouji laughed. “How ridiculous.”

The way he said it, similar to her father and brothers, ticked Ruri off. She whirled around and walked away.

“What’s the matter?” the man asked. “You’re always angry when I see you.”

“Leave me alone!” she snapped, turning back around. She cast her eyes down. “Um, Mushanokouji-san, I don’t know what my father and brothers told you, but I have no plans to marry at the moment.”

When she didn’t hear a reply, she lifted her gaze up and saw Mushanokouji clearly disappointed. His face was like an open book.

“Why?” he asked.

“I, um... I have a goal.”

“A goal?”

“Actually...” Ruri hesitated for a moment. “I’ve been offered a teaching position in Seian after graduation. It was a very attractive offer. So, no

matter what my father and brothers say, I can't marry you, or anyone else for that matter at the moment."

Ruri's heart was racing. Her father's pet phrase came to her mind. Women this, women that.

Her father and brothers, who had a habit of saying 'you can't' and 'it's impossible' before she even started doing anything. Her adorable and obedient younger brother, who had to endure that all his life. His sad eyes, and his decision to leave for a faraway country. And her father's stubbornness that almost denied him that choice.

But despite the thoughts running through her mind, Ruri continued.

"To tell you the truth, I have never seriously thought about my future before. But when I received the offer, I thought about it for the first time. I thought to myself, 'I am no longer a child. I must make a proper decision about my future, instead of moping around, thinking about my brother abroad.' That future is uncertain, to be sure, but there's hope and new things to discover. So..."

Mushanokouji was silent.

He must be appalled, Ruri thought. Hiding her diffidence, she held out her right hand.





“That’s my decision, *Mushanokouji-san*.”

Mushanokouji did not shake her hand. He simply stared at Ruri in silence.

Hmm?

Behind his large body and bearded face, there were two familiar, jet-black eyes regarding Ruri silently. Black eyes that she’d seen since she was a child, kind and slightly melancholic.

His eyes look familiar...

After a moment of staring at each other, *Mushanokouji* turned around without saying a word. His back was even bigger than her father’s and brother’s. His khaki army cloak rustled.

“U-Um, *Mushanokouji-san*?”

He didn’t look back even when called. Ruri watched the man blankly as he strode away without a word.

A pale moon sat in the night sky.

It was in the middle of the following week that *Mushanokouji* paid a visit to the *Kujou* household. Not even sparing a glance at the curious Ruri, he went straight into her father’s study, where they talked for a long time about something.

What are they talking about? Ruri wondered.

Curious, she listened from the corridor. But she couldn’t hear anything at all.

Soon, the door opened and *Mushanokouji* came out alone. Ruri, who had been in an eavesdropping pose in the hallway, jumped. Unperturbed, *Mushanokouji* shot her a glance, then bowed and left.

Ruri noticed one thing odd about him.

He was wearing the same army uniform, and the same sword hung on his waist.

But for some reason, blood was dripping from his right hand’s thumb.

“You’re bleeding!” Ruri said.

“Oh, this? It’s nothing,” *Mushanokouji* said as he quickly left the house.

Later that night, Ruri’s father summoned her to his study. Amid the heavy atmosphere, her father told him that *Mushanokouji* declined the marriage proposal.

“Do what you want,” her father said.

Ruri left the study. As she walked down the dark corridor, she felt strange, somewhat sad.

I can't believe a man himself declined.

Hanging her head, she tried to picture Mushanokouji's bearded face.

I did tell him that I couldn't marry him.

Her heart sank, and she sighed.

“Right. Yutaka! There's something I want to—”

As soon as she opened the sliding door to her brother's laboratory, there was a loud explosion. A large man in a casual kimono and dark-rimmed glasses lumbered out of the room filled with black smoke.

“You called, Ruripe?”

Ruri coughed. “I, um... It's nothing. Be more careful,” she said, then left the laboratory.

“And that's it for the thick letter that was sent with the blue kimono.”

Across the ocean, in a corner of St. Marguerite Academy, nestled within the mountains of Western Europe.

Kazuya folded the letter and tucked it into his kimono, then went back into his room. He took out another letter from the drawer of his desk and returned.

Victorique was flipping through a book with a yawn. The twitching of her small white ears, visible through her long and silky, magnificent golden hair, served as the only indication that she was actually listening to Kazuya as he read the letter out loud.

Kazuya nodded to himself. “And this here is the letter I received about a month later, along with the candies. I'm reading it out.”

There was a soft grunt.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Go ahead and read it.”

Kazuya smiled, straightened up, and resumed reading.

A month had passed since that spring day when the marriage proposal died away just as suddenly as it had come.

Ruri Kujou was taking special classes to become a teacher at the girls' school under the guidance of Ms. Fuyou. It was much more difficult and demanding than her regular classes.

But I'm sure it's much harder for my brother who's studying abroad alone. I have to hang in there.

Her hard work surprised even Ms. Fuyou.

I want to prove to my father and brothers that I can do it too. Besides...

Ruri's cheeks reddened a little from humiliation.

She felt irritated as she recalled the large man who walked away silently without even shaking the hand she offered.

Once after-school study session ended, Ruri rode her bicycle down the pavement, her long black hair flowing in the wind.

On the way, she spotted a stall with pretty candies on display. She stopped her bicycle to buy some for her younger brother.

“Oh, it’s you again.”

Someone called out to her from behind. Ruri looked over shoulder and saw a somewhat familiar face. The handsome young man, Kira, was standing there. He was still carrying the same large square package on his back, though a little different in size than the other day.

“I sure see you around a lot,” Kira said. “I know. Let me treat you to some food here.”

He pointed at the shop’s signboard. Ruri wasn’t sure whether to accept his invitation.

“Can’t stop by somewhere without your father’s permission?” the man added. He sounded panicked for some reason.

“I-I can!” Ruri snapped back, then followed Kira into the shop.

A few uniformed policemen passed by on the street outside.

“The phantom struck again!”

“They stole a painting this time. Find them! They should still be nearby.”

When they entered the shop and took their seats, Ruri ordered *anmitsu* while Kira ordered ice cream. Ruri devoured her food as soon as it arrived.





“By the way, remember when we bumped into each other near the department store?” Kira asked.

Ruri gave a jerk, and looked down. “Y-Yes.”

“I saw you with a large man after that. He got this beard, and was wearing an army officer’s uniform.”

Ruri shuddered again. *H-He’s talking about Mushanokouji-san...*

Kira chuckled. “How do you even know that huge, filthy guy? You were scowling the whole time, while he was all smiles. I’ve never seen such an odd combination before. You must’ve been ashamed to be around him. It was like Beauty and the Beast.”

Ruri frowned. *You can’t talk about people’s looks like that.*

Kira went on, oblivious to the look on her face. “I bet no girl would approach a man that grimy. Times are changing. Guys gotta dress smart too.”

Ruri recalled the look on Mushanokouji’s face when he silently listened to her talk about her future. She was staring at her with those strange, familiar eyes.

Right. Then it dawned on her. *His eyes look like my brother’s.* What was he thinking back then?

“I don’t care if he’s an elite officer in the army,” Kira continued. “How does he get the nerve to talk to a beauty like you? Does he even own... a... mirror...? What’s wrong?”

Ruri stood up, put the payment for her food on the table, and hurried out of the store. Mounting her bicycle, she sped down the pavement.

As Ruri got off her bicycle at the Kujou family gate, the front door opened, and her brother, Yutaka, appeared. He was wearing a shabby casual kimono and black-rimmed glasses. He was actually dressed up today—in his own way—with his unkempt hair parted on one side.

“Ruripe,” Yutaka called cheerfully when he saw her. “Come shopping with me for a bit, will you?”

“No.”

“Come on now.”

It was doubtful if he actually heard her reply. He squeezed his pretty sister’s hand and dragged her with him. His *geta*, faded from exposure to the elements, clattered.

“I just got home,” Ruri said. “What is this about?”

“I said shopping. We’re buying stuff.”

“Just go alone.”

“But I don’t know what women like.”

Ruri’s eyes went wide with shock.

He plans to buy something women like? Yutaka? I’ve only seen him eating bowls of rice and doing strange experiments. I wonder what’s wrong with him. Did he score himself a girlfriend? Nah, no way. Not him.

The siblings went out to a corner downtown where small stores lined the streets. While picking out hairpins, sash clips, and purses, Ruri dumped the things that had been bothering her recently to her brother.

“I hate that you guys decided to accept *Mushanokouji-san*’s marriage proposal without consulting me, but I also hate that he withdrew it.”

Yutaka laughed. “Well, you’re pretty,” he said as he picked out some random hairpin. “I’d understand if you got mad if a man treated you coldly. Funny.”

Ruri, unsure if he was even paying attention, scowled. “But...”

“You really don’t remember?”

“Remember what?”

“*Mushanokouji-san*. Ten years and one month ago. When you were only seven years old, some of Yasuhiro’s school friends came to hang out, and one of them picked you up and said you were adorable. He asked if you would marry him, and you got so mad, you ran away screaming ‘I hate you!’ I was there, and I laughed so hard. The shock made him shrink. You were wearing a light-blue kimono with a pink *obi* at the time. We had forgotten about it, but he still remembers it ten years later. He said you were pretty.”

“What?”

Ruri didn’t know what to say.

She snatched the hairpin out of her brother’s hand. “I remember a little. So the student back then was *Mushanokouji-san*?”

“That’s right. After that, *Mushanokouji* told Yasuhiro that you were pretty and wanted you as his wife. I was more upset than he was. I told him to stop messing with a kid. And that if he was serious, then he should come back in ten years.”

“...”

“And then last month, exactly ten years after that, he showed up. I totally forgot about it, and I was the one who gave him the idea. I didn’t know he liked you that much. It’s actually quite funny.”

“...”

Ruri was at a loss for words again.

“Then why did he suddenly withdraw his proposal?” she asked, fiddling through the hairpins on display. “Is it because I’ve changed so much after ten years?”

Yutaka chuckled. “What are you talking about? You haven’t changed a bit. You said ‘I hate you’ ten years ago, and you said ‘I hate you’ now. You even had the same look on your face.”

“Then why?”

Ruri picked out stuff the ladies might like while pondering things over.

On the way home, Yutaka noticed Ruri still deep in thought.

“Don’t tell anyone about this,” he reluctantly said.

“About what?”

“Mushanokouji didn’t withdraw the proposal. Apparently he had some kind of discussion with our father. Since you wanted to become a teacher, he advised to let you do it. Father complained, but Mushanokouji said he’ll come back after ten years.”

“Another ten years?!” Ruri exclaimed.

Yutaka chuckled. “Anyway, father drafted a pledge, and Mushanokouji sealed it with his blood. Father was relieved. So there you have it. Ten years from now. He’ll come back just when you’ve forgotten about him.”

“So that’s why he was bleeding back then.”

Ruri fell silent.

Walking alongside her brother, she vaguely recalled Mushanokouji’s quiet eyes that night as he silently listened to her, and his broad back as he strode away without even taking her hand.

Memories flashed. She thought about what happened at home after that.

Her father’s attitude suddenly softened after vehemently opposing her at first. Her evasive brothers. Her mother, who seemed to want to say something. Oblivious to these things, Ruri thought she paved the way to her future on her own as she studied furiously.

She was narrow-minded and so full of herself.

Her cheeks turned a little red, and she bit her lip.

She felt strange, a little frustrated.

Mushanokouji-san's promise was protecting me.

"But I..." Ruri forced the words out. "I don't like men covering for me. I've always hated men."

"Just accept the fact that despite that, there's still a man who wants to protect you," Yutaka said.

Ruri shook her head. "I still hate him."

"Then tell him that again in ten years," Yutaka scoffed.

He peered into his bag of goods. Hairpins, sash clips, a purse.

"Speaking of which," Ruri said. "Why did you buy things for women? Come on, tell me."

"N-No way. I don't have a girlfriend. I'd never tell anyone something that embarrassing. Let's hurry. And don't you dare tell anyone about this. This one's under the rose."

"What? What's this about a rose?"

"It's nothing. Ouch! Let go! It hurts! Why, you..."

As they grappled with each other, the siblings arrived at the Kujou home. They passed through the front door, looking like nothing happened, and announced their arrival to their parents.

That night...

Ruri packed the sparkly candies she bought today to send to her brother, and wrote down the details of the incident in a letter to be included in the package. Once again, the letter ended up quite long. She was curious about her brother Yutaka and the mysterious woman, but after some hesitation, she decided not to write about them.

Next to the letter to her brother was a blank piece of paper. After much thought, she decided to write.

"Dear Mushanokouji.

You may return ten years from now. But I will not mind you visiting the Kujou household from time to time.

Ruri Kujou"

Now the question was whether to mail the letter or not.

Ruri wasn't quite sure what to do. Again strange emotions swirled within her—a mix of frustration and sadness.

For hours Ruri just frowned at the letter that contained only a few lines.

Outside the window, the blue moon was shining through the thin screens, illuminating the floor in Ruri's room. Her long hair and moist, jet-black eyes, like those of a black cat, gleamed under the moonlight.

The night in the imperial capital wore on with Ruri's pensive thoughts.

Back to the European continent, to St. Marguerite Academy, standing at the foot of the mountains. The grand school building shimmered in the heat haze created by the blazing sun.

In the corridor of the boys' dormitory, Victorique lifted her head wearily and yawned. A small pearly tear formed at the corner of her jewel-like, emerald eyes. Wiping it away with the back of her small hand, she looked up at Kazuya.

"What an awfully long letter!" she exclaimed. "Is that it?"

"Yeah," Kazuya replied. "So there you have it. The story behind your kimono and candies. Well? Did it stave off your boredom?"

Victorique yawned again. She brushed back her long and silky, magnificent golden hair, then scratched her head.

"I wonder if in ten years, your sister will marry the phantom," she said.

"Who knows? Wait, who?"

Victorique let go of her hair. Her emerald eyes widened in genuine shock. Her beautiful, cold face, pretty as an expensive porcelain doll, which hardly showed any kind of emotion, was displaying an extremely rare expression of astonishment.

"Monsieur Mushanokouji was the cloaked phantom who flew through the night sky," Victorique said, appalled. "Don't tell me you didn't realize that while reading the letter. Please, tell me it's not true."

"I don't know what you want me to say. Unfortunately, I didn't realize anything. So what do you mean by that? Why would Mushanokouji fly off the roof of a department store? Why would an army officer steal an expensive vase, and dress as a phantom at that?"

"To help your sister."

"What?!" Kazuya squealed.

He returned the letter to his room, came out into the corridor, and sat down next to Victorique. He peered into her little face, waiting for an explanation.



“Your face says you want me to verbalize it,” she sighed.

“Yes. Of course.”

“You’re such a handful!”

“Look who’s talking! Tell me, quick!”

Victorique puffed out her rosy cheeks. A moment later, she reluctantly spoke.

“The cloaked phantom didn’t steal the vase, go up to the roof, and then fly away through the night sky. He just made it look that way. The truth is, he flew down to the ground.”

“Flew down? From the rooftop?”

“The letter mentioned that your sister Ruri met Monsieur Mushanokouji as she was walking along the backstreets of the department store. She said that behind him on the outer wall of the department store, a banner was swaying in the wind. If the banner was hung vertically, it would have to be secured at the top and bottom. But the bottom part was not secured, which is why it was swaying.”

“Ahuh...”

“I believe the banner was originally hung horizontally, tied around the windows on the top floor of the department store, right to left. Monsieur Mushanokouji cut the string that tied one end with his sword. Then he escaped from the rooftop to the ground by sliding down the banner, using it like a ladder.”

“Hmm... But why would he do that?”

Victorique smiled thinly. “He probably witnessed Miss Ruri and her schoolmate breaking the expensive vase. To cover for them, he quickly pretended to be the suspicious phantom, stole the vase, and vanished with a flourish. The real phantom, famous for stealing paintings, is probably a different person, though. A master thief who specializes in paintings would have no reason to steal a broken vase. In short, the broken vase theft was the work of a fake phantom.”

“But she mentioned a flaring cloak. Did he have one with him?”

Victorique shrugged. “Your sister wrote it, didn’t she? Monsieur Mushanokouji was an army officer, and wore a khaki cloak. It’s hard to recognize it from a distance. He probably wore it inside out or upside down to disguise the color. The reason why he didn’t take her hand when they parted was because he had a large vase hidden inside the cloak. That

would've been a chance to hold the hand of the woman he'd loved for ten years."

“...”

“Monsieur must be very fond of your sister. As an elite officer, he would've been severely punished by the army if they found out. He took a huge risk to help her.”

Kazuya fell silent, frowning.

“You must be frustrated that some mysterious phantom is going to take your sister away from you,” Victorique teased when she saw the look on his face.





“O-Of course not,” Kazuya said. “If anything, I’m worried. My sister is an interesting character, but she’s terribly dense when it comes to these kinds of stuff. I don’t know where she got it honestly. Since I was a kid, I’ve seen so many guys who had a crush on her get crushed when she didn’t reciprocate their feelings. I have a feeling that if I don’t do anything about it, she’ll just sit there and not make any progress for the next ten years. I’m just worried about my sister, you know.”

Kazuya heaved a deep sigh.

Victorique gave a disinterested grunt and returned to her book. Her golden hair cascaded down to the cold floor like a glittering stream.

The summer sun blazed outside. The colorful flowers in the flowerbeds rustled in the hot breeze. A white fountain, like a pillar of melting ice, continued spouting refreshing water in the middle of the empty garden.

Summer of 1924—quiet, but concealing a mysterious fervor.

In a corner of a majestic school nestled in the foothills of the Alps in Western Europe.

“Kujou,” Victorique muttered after a while.

Kazuya raised his head. “Yes?” He looked at her and saw a deep frown on her face. “Wh-What is it now?”

“I’m getting bored again.”

“Whaaat? But I’ve got nothing left. I already told you all the mysterious stuff, and you finished all the snacks.”

“Then go out there and find some.”

“There’s no one outside either.”

Victorique’s rosy cheeks puffed out.

Kazuya stared at her pudgy face for a while. Then he started giggling. Victorique’s cheeks bulged even further.

An empty, majestic school standing under the summer sun.

Time passed, slowly and peacefully.

Chapter 5: The Girl in the Painting

Summer's end was approaching, and the sun's rays had grown softer. St. Marguerite Academy.

The U-shaped school building, bathed in the rays of the summer sun, was completely silent, with no students in sight. The campus, modeled after French-style gardens, was filled with colorful flowers, a white fountain that looked like melting pillars of ice, cozy gazebos, and dense thickets. It was as vast and quiet as ever.

A few squirrels wandered out of the woods and scurried across the verdant lawn. A small oriental boy wearing an indigo kimono with a dark *obi* was walking along the path beside the grass, his *geta* clattering.

He had smooth jet-black hair and somewhat forlorn, jet-black eyes. Wearing a grave look, he was holding a folded parasol with white and pink frills that clashed with his overall attire.

“Hey, Victorique!”

He continued down the path, looking for someone. He couldn't find them in the gazebo, the bench on the lawn, or under the cozy shade of the trees. After a while, the boy—Kazuya Kujou—went back the same way.

“Victorique! Where are you? Victorique!”

Calling the same name, he checked under the bench and behind the flowerbeds, as though looking for a lost kitten.

“Where did she go?”

He was getting worried by the minute.

End of summer. There were only a few days left in St. Marguerite Academy's long break.

“Victorique!”

Evening.

As the sun's rays began to wane, casting a slight shadow over the grass, the fountain emitted a soothing sound, occasionally accompanied by the chirping of birds.

Kazuya, wearing the same outfit as earlier, came walking down the path again. He had left his parasol somewhere and was instead holding a large, freshly-baked whole cake in one hand.

“Victorique? I got snacks!” he shouted, swinging the cake from side to side. “It’s a freshly-baked orange cake. Where on earth did you go? Miss Sophie gave this to me. I know you want it. Here, Victorique!”

A faint, husky groan came from really close by. Kazuya jumped, almost dropping the cake. He looked around. Placing the orange cake on the bench, he peeked under the bench, and reached into the hollow of a large zelkova tree nearby.

“Victorique? Where are you?”

“Over here, you buffoon.” The voice sounded even grumpier.

Kazuya looked around once more. Then he glanced up in disbelief.

There was a golden tuft hanging down from the dense foliage of a large tree. Swaying invitingly, it looked like the tail of some ancient, mysterious creature.

Kazuya cocked his head to the side. Then he grabbed the golden tail and tugged.

“Stop!” A growl came from above.

Frowning, Kazuya peered into the leaves.

Like a lone flower blooming, a heap of bright pink ruffles and translucent, exquisite laces stirred high above, irritated.

“Victorique? Oh, little, cranky lady. What are you doing up there?”

Her stomach grumbled in response.

“Are you hungry?” Kazuya said. “Oh, yeah. I haven’t seen you all day. Not in the library, the candy house, or the gazebo. Don’t tell me you were up there the whole time. Come on down. I’ve got some sweet and fluffy freshly-baked cake for you.”

Victorique’s face, small and refined, like a porcelain doll, appeared from the leaves. Green eyes gleaming darkly. Lips as glossy as cherries. Her rosy cheeks had paled a little.

“What’s wrong?” Kazuya asked. “Come on down.”

Victorique grunted.

Kazuya held his hand up, then lowered it back down, realizing that it was rather high. His gaze went from Victorique to the branches and the hollow of the zelkova tree, then back up to Victorique.

“I think I know what’s going on,” he said.

“...”

“You can’t get down, can you?”

Like a wild animal whose pride had been wounded, Victorique hung her head silently, her face flushed red from embarrassment. Kazuya kept his gaze away from her as much as possible.

“I’ll go get a ladder,” he said. “Just hide there.”

Kazuya sprinted away. Victorique’s expression softened in relief.

A dry summer breeze blew, shaking the lush leaves and Victorique’s golden hair that hung down like a tail. It was a quiet, peaceful, summer evening.

At that moment, Ms. Cecile and Sophie the dorm mother, arrived, holding hands. Since it was summer break, they weren’t in their work attire; instead they were wearing simple white dresses and pretty sandals. Ms. Cecile, with her curly brown hair and her large round glasses, was having a fun chat with the freckled, red-haired Sophie.

Ms. Cecile noticed the delicious-looking cake on the bench. She poked her friend’s arm.

“Look, Sophie! Cake.”

“Hmm? Oh, you’re right. It’s the one I baked earlier. What’s it doing here?”

They sat down on the bench and started eating the cake together. Leaves fell from the nearby zelkova tree, branches shook, and there was a strange, animal-sounding cry. But neither of them cared as they ate the whole thing, gossiping about women from the village and talking about clothes and last night’s dinner.

Cecile and Sophie stood up like nothing happened and walked away, hand-in-hand.

“That was delicious.”

“It really was.”

“So anyway, this dessert I had last night...”

All that was left was an empty bench, an unusually large number of fallen leaves, and faint sobs.

“Victorique!”

A few moments later, Kazuya came running back sweating, carrying a ladder. With the hem of his kimono in disarray, he climbed the ladder to the tree, and held out his arms with a smile to his little friend buried in the leaves.

Out of nowhere, she scratched him on the face, and he screamed.

“Ow! Watch it!” Kazuya warned. “I’m here to help you, and this is what I get? Just settle down, and... Stop pinching my face! Why are you crying? The cake? Ouch!”

The ladder swayed precariously. After a few moments of silent grappling, Kazuya finally managed to calm his friend down. He carried the mass of frills and laces—Victorique de Blois—under her arm and went down the ladder. His glum face was full of scratches.

“I’ll ask her to make another one,” he said.

“...”

“Don’t you dare scratch me. It hurts.”

“...”

“Are you listening? If you ever pull a stunt like this again, I’m going to be really pissed off at you.”

“Hmph.”

The two made it above ground. While Kazuya was putting the ladder away, Victorique dashed across the grass toward the flowerbed maze, her pink ruffles rustling.

“Hey! Where are you going?” There was a tinge of sadness in Kazuya’s voice.

Carrying the ladder, he started walking down the darkening pathway.

Meanwhile...

In a corner of the village, just a short distance away from the campus of St. Marguerite Academy...

A man in his fifties with graying hair was ordering people to carry stuff into the village hall located across the brick police station.

“Useless. Every single one of you,” he spat. For a while now, he’d done nothing but arrogantly boss people around. “All right, unpack that one. That goes here. We’re not going to make it in time for the exhibit tomorrow.”

The man—the custodian of the art gallery on the ground floor—wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“We’re going to display the famous ‘**Portrait of a Lady in Ribbons**.’ Everything has to be in order for a successful exhibit.”

He yelled at a young boy. The workers nervously unpacked the paintings and sculptures, arranging them as instructed.

“I swear to God,” the custodian mumbled again.

“I’m counting on you. I’m sure you’ll do well even without this great inspector around. Hahaha!”

Meanwhile in the police station across the street, Inspector Grevil de Blois, who had recently made a name for himself by solving one case after another, was just now striding down the corridor, his sparkling, drill-shaped hair swinging from side to side.

As usual, he was dressed impeccably like a beau. He was wearing a silk shirt with shiny cufflinks and a silver watch on his wrist. In one hand he carried a briefcase and in the other he held an antique porcelain doll that was said to cost enough to buy an entire mansion. The little exotic-looking doll with black hair and blue eyes seemed to be staring at Inspector Blois’s odd hairdo in disbelief.

Behind him, a pair of young men wearing rabbit-skin hunting caps, holding hands, nodded.

“We will!”

“We’ll be fine, Inspector!”

They appeared to be around twenty years old and looked very much alike. Ian, however, was skinnier, with almond eyes, while Ivan had dropping eyes, and was a little chubby. Holding hands, they followed the inspector, deftly weaving their way through the busy corridor.

As they exited the building, Inspector Blois whirled around. His pointy drill glittered in the setting sun.

“Ian. Ivan.”

“Sir.”

“Sir.”

They regarded the inspector with innocent smiles.

“While I’m gone...”

Workers streamed out of the village hall across the street. The custodian was yelling about something, and a boy holding a big, flat package was

saying something in return. An older worker seemed to be holding him back.

Inspector Blois turned and saw the commotion. He narrowed his eyes, wondering what the ruckus was about. Then he turned his gaze back to his subordinates.

“If something happens while I’m gone, you two will solve it.”

“Yes, sir!

“Yes, sir!

“You will solve it even without me. Or else, you’re fired.”

“What?”

“What?”

Their faces darkened.

“What would I tell mom if I got fired?” Ian mumbled.

“My sister eats more than me,” Ivan added.

Inspector Blois’s eyes darted between the two.

“All you have to do is solve it. Easy enough. Bye now. I’m staying two nights in Saubreme, then I’ll be right back. I’m going to buy a new doll at the auction. See you later.” He walked away with a doll in his hand.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

They waved with their free hand. The door of the village hall across the street slammed shut.

The sun was setting, and the orange glow of evening was blanketing the village.

One evening, at the end of summer.

The next morning.

There were only a few days left until the end of the long summer break. In the lonely campus of St. Marguerite Academy...

“Stop acting like a child, Victorique.”

The sun had softened, and Victorique, in her frilly dress, was curled up on the cozy grass, lying on her stomach.

“Hey...”

Kazuya, still in his indigo kimono and *geta*, was standing by her side with a look of disbelief. The frilly parasol in his hand cast a round shadow

on the lawn, preventing the small, milky-skinned Victorique from getting sunburned.

Victorique, on the other hand, stubbornly refused to acknowledge him; she was putting all her attention on the book before her. The white, feather-like ribbon on her round back swayed gently in the dry summer breeze.

“It’s only morning, and you’re already sulking. At least say something.”

Victorique gave a faint groan, looking like her pride was wounded. Her small face, tinged with boredom and weariness, showed almost no expression. But there was something, some hint of embarrassment.

“You were up in the tree all day yesterday. We didn’t even get to talk. And today you’re sulky. Let’s talk about something. I know. How about one of your incredibly obscure trivia? I’ll listen until the end.”

“...”

“So...”

“...”

“Turn around and get up. Look, the wind is blowing your dress.”

“I’m...”

“It’s flipping your dress. I can see your bloomers! Isn’t that your underwear?! Though I’m not exactly familiar with your attire. Get your act... toge... ther... Did you say something?”

Victorique lifted herself up with a frown, and with her small pudgy hands, she fixed the hem of her disheveled dress, bloomers with rose embroidery at the buttocks, and the petticoat, made of rounded whalebone to puff out the skirt. She sat down in the round shadow created by Kazuya’s parasol and stared up at him.

“Wh-What is it?” Kazuya asked.

“I’m hungry.”

“I-I see...”

“Get me something tasty.”

“Okay. Where from?”

“The village should have something.”

Victorique rolled over again, swinging her legs clad in ribboned boots, and opened her book.

“What are you waiting for? Go. Buy me something quick.”

“Hmm... Tsk. Fine, you little snot,” Kazuya grumbled.

He set the parasol down on the grass, straightened his back, and wearing a serious look, started walking down the pathway.

Meanwhile, along the biggest street in the village, there was a bit of a commotion.

In front of the village hall, the custodian was shouting at the top of his lungs, his gray beard quivering.

“Help! Someone stole the precious painting! The Portrait of the Lady in Ribbons is gone!”

His urgent screams drew people from all over the place. Village girls walking down the main street, the staff and customers of the store across, and even a lady carrying a load of laundry.

“Help! This one right here stole it!”

The custodian had restrained an elegant young woman. She did not look like she was from the village, and her white dress and white shoes looked quite expensive. Her long, straw-colored hair was parted and tied in two, and her waist was adorned with several layers of marbled-patterned white ribbons.

The custodian grabbed the woman’s arm and shook her. “When this woman appeared, the painting was gone!” he cried. “It was definitely there just a moment ago. It disappeared in an instant. Shameless thief!”

Panic seized the woman’s throat. Her face was pale as a sheet. “I-I didn’t do it,” she mumbled, shaking her head.

“What’s going on?” the village mayor asked as he stepped in, eyeing them both.

The custodian shrank a little. “The Portrait of the Lady in Ribbons, which we borrowed from a museum in Saubreme for the exhibition, was stolen!”

“Wh-What?” The village mayor’s face darkened. “But it was there when I peeked into the gallery half an hour ago.”

“Exactly! This outsider came in, took a look around, and then tried to leave. When I looked up, the painting was gone.”

“I just happened to be here on a summer holiday,” the woman mumbled on the verge of tears. “I’m staying at a nearby inn. I was going to take the train back this morning, so I thought I’d go in for a quick look. Besides...”

The woman held out her hands. The village chief, the custodian, and the crowd of villagers watching the whole situation, let out a collective gasp.

The woman had nothing. Teary-eyed, she looked around at the faces of the villagers.

A villager pointed at the woman. “But you entered, and when you were about to leave, the painting was gone.”

“Actually, I didn’t see her come in,” the custodian said. “I just saw her inside. I thought she must have come in through the open door since the exhibition’s started already. I didn’t hear any footsteps, though. And then when she was leaving, I looked back at the painting, and it was gone. No, wait. It wasn’t gone, exactly.”

The custodian glanced back at the gallery. In the most conspicuous spot in the center of the room, there was a blank, white canvas. He pointed at it, horrified.

“The painting reverted back to a white canvas. It was blank.”

“Doesn’t she look exactly like the lady in the portrait?” said another villager, studying the woman.

The villagers looked at the woman in the white dress and ribbons eerily.

“It sounds like you stepped out of the painting,” a villager muttered.

“That’s why the painting is blank.”

The woman shook her head repeatedly. The villagers exchanged glances.

Meanwhile...

On the third floor of the police station across the clamorous village hall, there were men standing by the window overlooking the street, holding hands.

Almond-eyed Ian and droopy-eyed Ivan. Ian was holding a newspaper in his free hand, and Ivan a candy bar. Ian pulled his eyes away from the newspaper, while Ivan removed the candy from his mouth, both dumbfounded.

On the main street, the mayor and the custodian were arguing around a female outsider. The villagers joined in, shouting about who had stolen it, how expensive it was, what they were going to do now, and so on.

“I-Is that a case?” Ian said shakily.

Ivan shook his head. “I don’t think so. They’re practicing for a play.”

“Right. The Fall Harvest Festival is coming up soon. No, wait. That’s still a long way off. Besides, practicing a play in the middle of the street so early? Would they really do that?”

“I don’t think so.”

“They wouldn’t.”

“...”

“...”

They exchanged looks.

The wall clock ticked by. It was growing louder and louder outside.

After staring at each other for several seconds, they sighed at the same time.

“Sounds like a case.”

“Ahuh.”

“What a pain.”

“A pain it is. Fine. Let’s go check it out.”

“I’ve been working on a theory for a while now,” Ian muttered as they walked down the stairs of the station, hand-in-hand.

“A theory?”

“Have you ever wondered if Inspector Blois is actually smart?”

Ivan stopped in his tracks, halfway down the stairs. They exchanged looks.

“I have,” Ivan said. “I mean, isn’t he weird?”

“He is.”

“Right?”

“You know how sometimes he can be so brilliant, he solves even the hardest cases?”

“Yeah.”

“I-Isn’t that suspicious?”

“...”

“At first it looks like he’s completely clueless. Then he goes out somewhere, and when he comes back, he solves the case with ease. We’ve seen him do that a few times, no?”

“Yeah. The Motorcycle Decapitation Case, Ciaran the Master Thief. There was one more before that. The kidnapping of a businessman’s kid. That one was a big deal. For some reason, he said that we had to do the

devil's bidding to solve the case, forcing us to hold hands. He didn't say we could let go, so we've been like this ever since."

"I don't really mind. I'm used to it by now."

They started down the stairs again.

"What I'm saying is," Ian continued eagerly, "before he solves a case, he always goes to that place. You know what I'm talking about, right?"

Ivan tilted his head in thought, then exclaimed, "Ah!"

"You get it now?"

"The library tower!"

"Yup. Inspector Blois hurries to St. Marguerite Academy even though he has no business there. And every time he has this face like he really doesn't want to go. He heads straight to the library tower and climbs up, while leaving us waiting down below. And when he comes back down, he's in an even worse mood, yelling at us. And then..." Ian snapped his fingers. "He solves the case."

"What do you mean?"

They reached the ground floor. They trotted down the hallway, hand in hand, toward the front door.

"So here's what I think," Ian went on. "There's a great detective at the top of the library tower. You get it now?"

"I don't think there's anyone up there. There's an old legend that that's where Saubreme's old king used to hide his mistress. It's just a conservatory now, though."

"Ah, but there *is* someone up there." Ian grinned. "Think. You remember the student we used to take to the library tower at Inspector Blois' orders? He's no ordinary guy."

Ivan's breath caught. Opening the double door, he said, "He's the secret detective?"

"No doubt about it."

They stepped out of the police station onto the main street, squinting at the brightness.

Ian took a deep breath. "Kazuya Kujou, the foreign student from the Orient! He's the secret detective behind Inspector Blois!"

"Hmm? What did I do?" Kazuya, running down the street with his wallet in hand, *geta* clattering loudly, stopped in his tracks.

“Stop! Why are you pulling me?! I have to buy snacks!”

Ian and Ivan dragged Kazuya with them, each grabbing one hand. He tried to shake them off, but their grips were firm. As he flailed about, his feet lifted off the ground. They had broken into a run.





“My *geta*! My *geta* are coming off! What’s going on? This is tyranny!”

“We need you to solve a case.”

“It’s just over there. I’m sure you won’t take long.”

“A case?”

The three arrived in front of the village hall, where a huge commotion had broken out. They listened as the mayor and the custodian took turns talking about the painting, the canvas, and the woman who looked just like the subject, while Ivan took notes in the notebook Ian was holding. Wearing an earnest look, Kazuya paid close attention.

Ian and Ivan took the woman to the police station.

Kazuya wondered what on earth was going on. *Maybe I should talk to Victorique. Looks like they’re in a fix. And this should help stave off her boredom.*

He walked back to the academy.

In a cozy gazebo at sunny St. Marguerite Academy, Victorique was sitting on a round chair, slumped over a round wooden table that was too high for her small frame. Victorique’s magnificent golden hair lay scattered like a bundle of untied silk threads on the table, cascading down to the floor like a waterfall of gold.

In addition to Victorique’s small head and slim arms, there were also other things on the table. An empty white plate, and a silver knife and fork that seemed too big for her.

“I’m hungry,” she mumbled in a sad, faint voice.

A rumble came from within her fluffy dress. She lay on the table like a lazy kitten, unable to move. But suddenly he heard a sound coming from afar, and her tiny ears twitched.

Clatter. Clatter.

It was the sound of wooden sandals. It was coming from the deserted pathway, headed toward the gazebo. Victorique’s face was expressionless, still as an ancient creature’s, but a faint smile appeared on her lips.

“...rique!”

She heard someone calling her name from the distance. The voice, along with the sound of footsteps, was getting closer and closer. Victorique smiled as she raised her body up.

Her stomach rumbled again.

Kazuya's voice was getting closer. "Victorique!"

"You're finally back, you scoundrel."

"I brought your favorite!" Kazuya yelled as he came running toward her.

Victorique got up from her seat. With an empty white plate in front of her, a knife in her right hand and a fork in her left, she looked at Kazuya.

"Very well. You're a bit late, but I will forgive you."

Her eyes widened in surprise. And she looked mad.

Kazuya was empty-handed. He rushed into the gazebo, *geta* clattering, kimono rustling.

"I got you a case!"

"..."

Victorique shot Kazuya a silent glare.

"Ow! Ow! Stop it, Victorique! I thought you'd love it! Besides, they're in a tight spot..."

"Where's the cake? The soufflés? Cookies? Jam? My snacks..."

Kazuya was running around in the gazebo, while Victorique, tears in her eyes, was stabbing him in the back with her knife and fork. She was glowering at him for bringing nothing.



Victorique let out a groan.

“Wh-What?”

“Traitor.”

“Okay, now you’re just overreacting. I came across an incident. I thought about sharing it with you, so I returned quick. And then I forgot to buy anything. Sorry about that. I’ll go buy you some food. Just wait here. I’m heading back to the village.” Kazuya turned to leave, then looked back. “What is it?”

Victorique was stepping on his *geta* with her little flower-patterned, high-heeled shoes.

Kazuya studied her face, but he saw no expression. He glanced at his feet. She was definitely stepping on his sandals.

Wait, is she stopping me from going?

“What?” Kazuya asked.

“Before you head back to the village, tell me about the case.”

“O-Okay.”

Victorique’s tiny stomach rumbled.

Kazuya sat down on a round chair. “So this morning,” he began, “something happened at the village hall’s art gallery...”

Meanwhile...

Ian and Ivan, who had been following Kazuya, were hiding behind the flowerbeds, watching him from among the colorful flowers in full bloom.

Up ahead, Kujou Kazuya, whom they suspected of being a great detective, was alone, playing with a doll for some reason.

On a small chair in the gazebo sat an elaborate porcelain doll with magnificent golden hair hanging down. Her white, ruffled dress billowed out like a flower, the miniature hat on her tiny head a bud about to blossom.

Kazuya seemed to be talking to the doll, wearing a serious expression.

“Come to think of it,” Ian said, bewildered. “Inspector Blois also likes dolls.”

“Yeah.” Ivan nodded.

“He left with a black-haired doll. He said it was worth a whole mansion.”

“But Kazuya Kujou’s doll is more...”

“Impressive.

“It’s almost like it’s alive,” Ivan breathed. “It’s beautiful. Extraordinary.”

“Yeah...”

“So does that mean that the Inspector and Kazuya Kujou are good friends because they both like dolls?”

“That must be it.”

“Ah, he left!”

Kazuya got up and left the gazebo, leaving the doll behind. Ian and Ivan quickly followed him.

The bright summer sun beamed down on the pathway. Refreshing water trickled down the white fountain.

When Kazuya returned to the village hall, the female tourist had just been released and was coming out of the police station across the street.

“Please wait!” Kazuya called her as she hurried away.

The woman turned around, startled. Just then, Ian and Ivan caught up with Kazuya.

“What’s wrong?” they asked.

“We can’t let her leave,” Kazuya said.

The village mayor and the custodian also came out, glancing at both Kazuya and the woman.

“I didn’t have anything in my possession, and they found nothing suspicious, so they let me go,” the woman grumbled. “I’m leaving.”

Ian and Ivan stopped her.

“Is she the culprit, then?” the mayor asked Kazuya. “How did she steal the painting? She didn’t have anything with her.”

“That’s right. She was empty-handed,” the custodian mumbled. “If she was the thief, where did the stolen painting go? It’s a big painting, you know.”

Kazuya nodded, and turned to Ian. “Please bring the white canvas that was left in the gallery.”

“Okay.”

Ian brought a blank canvas.

“Untie the long ribbon on the mademoiselle’s hair,” Kazuya told Ivan.

The moment he said that, the woman, who had been standing calmly, suddenly started screaming and thrashing about. Astonished, the police officers seized her and untied the ribbon that adorned her hair like the lady

in the painting. It was white on the front, but upon removing it, the back of the ribbon was a strange mixture of different colors with no pattern of any kind.

Kazuya took the ribbon and wrapped it around the canvas. After several attempts, he eventually found the perfect way to wrap it. As he continued wrapping the ribbon around the canvas, the image of the missing Portrait of the Lady in Ribbons gradually appeared on its surface.

“What is this? What is going on here?!” the village mayor exclaimed.

The custodian and the gathering villagers were gaping at the canvas.

When Kazuya was done, the painting was back on what was supposed to be a blank canvas.

“So you’re telling me that this woman walked into the exhibit earlier, untied the ribbon, wrapped it around her own hair, and came out empty-handed?” the custodian said. “After that, all that was left was a blank canvas.”

“That’s right,” Kazuya nodded.

“So the painting brought to the village was fake all along?” the mayor asked.

“Not really.” Kazuya turned to Ian and Ivan. “Please examine the room where the mademoiselle was staying. You will find the missing painting there. The authentic Portrait of the Lady in Ribbons.”

The mayor and the custodian looked at each other. Ian and Ivan just stood there blankly for a while.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Then hand-in-hand, they started away.

Approximately one hour later.

Soft sunlight was falling on the quiet, afternoon campus of St. Marguerite Academy.

On a plate on the round table in the gazebo sat a whole cake of pure-white cheese that Kazuya had bought, topped with a dollop of lingonberry jam.

“Cake, cake,” Victorique muttered melodiously.

Kazuya, standing behind her like an attendant, said worriedly, “Why’d you put a whole jar of jam? Look, your fingers are all sticky.”

“Quiet,” Victorique said curtly.

She cut a large piece of cake with her silver knife, stabbed it with her fork, and stuffed it into her little mouth. The lingonberry jam dripped from the corner of her glossy cherry lips down to her chin.

“There’s jam on your mouth,” Kazuya said. “You’re making a mess of your precious dress.”

Gobble, gobble.

Kazuya wiped Victorique’s face with a napkin. “You were starving, huh?”

“Of course.” Victorique stuffed the next piece into her mouth. “Your tardiness almost killed me.”

“You’re exaggerating. Anyway, what exactly happened in the painting case earlier?”

“You want me to verbalize it?” Victorique groaned.

Kazuya sat down in the round chair next to her, nodding repeatedly.

Victorique sighed. “Fine. It’s tedious, but I’ll gladly verbalize it for you, halfwit. I want to see tears as you thank me.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just get on with it.”

Victorique shot him a glare. “Let us designate the time the crime was committed as ‘hour zero’. It actually came much earlier than originally thought.”

“Can you explain it in simple terms? You know, so I can understand.”

“What I’m saying is,” she went on, sounding wearier. “You guys thought the woman stole the painting this morning when she was leaving the gallery with a ribbon in her hair. But the fact is, she didn’t. The painting was stolen yesterday.”

“What? But they said the painting was there this morning.”

“It was a fake. A blank canvas with a ribbon wrapped around it. It could’ve fooled anyone looking from a distance.” Victorique cut another piece of cake. “Listen closely. When the artworks were brought in yesterday, a small young worker, a boy, left while being yelled at by the custodian. The detectives said the boy was carrying a flat, square package. I believe—and this is only a guess—that the boy and woman who was arrested the next morning were the same person.”

“Now that you mention it, they found a worker’s uniform in the room with the painting.”

“Yes. She blended in with the workers, and somewhere along the way she replaced the real painting with a fake one with a ribbon wrapped around it. She then took the real one with her after bringing them to the gallery.”

“Ahuh, ahuh.”

“And to cover up the time of the crime, she went into the gallery this morning, this time dressed as a woman. She untied the ribbon to create a blank canvas, and tried to make it look as if the crime had been committed today. It would have been perfect if she got out without being caught, but even if she was caught, the authorities would find that she was empty-handed and wouldn’t bother checking the ribbon in her hair. After she was released, she was going to escape with the real painting, which she had hidden in the inn.”

“Oh...” Kazuya nodded. “I get it now. I’m glad we found the painting. The villagers were panicking.”

“Yes.”

A bird chirped. A slight breeze blew, rustling the lush green grass. The sunlight was growing gentler as the end of summer approached. Kazuya gazed at the scenery and then turned his gaze back to Victorique.

“I see. You’re so... Wait, what’s wrong?”

Victorique was silent, holding her stomach. She seemed to be in a bit of pain.

“What’s the matter? Why are you holding your stomach? Victorique?”

“I’m so... full...” Victorique left the gazebo and fell over on her back on the grass.





“You had too much to eat. You have a tiny stomach, so you shouldn’t be eating a cake that big. Victorique? Hello?” Kazuya hurried to her side. He opened the parasol he had left at the gazebo to shield her from the sun.

“Hey, Victorique.”

She groaned.

“Hey...”

“I’m getting bored again. And I’m also full.” Victorique closed her eyes. Kazuya studied her, then smiled. He looked up at the sky.

The peaceful, seemingly-endless summer break was almost over. The academy’s students would take over the lawns, gazebos, and benches once they returned from their holidays. Then Victorique would probably return to her quiet, secret hideout at the top of the library tower.

Kazuya watched his friend. Victorique had her little belly facing the sky, her eyes closed in contentment. Her golden hair billowed out on the green grass like a sparkling gold fan.

I’d like to cherish the rest of the summer break with her.

He smiled once more.

Chapter 6: First Love

The late summer sun glinted off the cobblestone pavement. Verdant trees lined the streets, where carriages and automobiles drove past.

The wind blew, hot yet gentle, hesitant to change with the seasons.

As the vacation season neared its end, Saubreme, the capital of the Kingdom of Sauville, also known as the ‘Little Giant of Western Europe,’ was quiet and almost deserted. Men returning home from vacation, their skin tanned by the Mediterranean sun, strode down the sidewalks, while young girls, still entranced by the summer holidays, disembarked from the luxurious, steel-and-glass Charles de Gillet train station, hailing carriages as they dragged their heavy suitcases. A summer breeze rustled the roadside trees.

The red bricks and cobblestone streets that showcased the city’s long history, and the smell of iron and coal produced by the waves of modernization, gave Saubreme, one of the leading economic cities in Western Europe, a majestic atmosphere.

A luxurious carriage pulled up in front of an old, stately brick building. The horse neighed, hooves clattering rhythmically on the cobblestones. The driver opened the door politely. Young girls passing by glanced back a few times, anxious to see what kind of noblewoman would alight.

The first thing that appeared from the carriage was an ordinary pair of old, but well-maintained women’s shoes. A second later, the owner of the shoes jumped down.

“You shouldn’t jump down like that, Madam,” the driver said. “You might twist your leg.”

“But it’s too high. I will jump down.”

“There you go again.” The driver looked appalled.

The homely noblewoman gave the driver a kiss on the cheek.

The driver gave an embarrassed smile. “If you get hurt, the Master will give me an earful.”

“Then I will give my husband an earful. And a spanky-spank.”

“Oh, I’d like to see that,” the driver muttered as he helped a young maid in a blue-and-white uniform down from the carriage. “It’s not every day you see the Police Commissioner of Saubreme being scolded by his wife.”

The maid, a young and fashionable girl, giggled. The noblewoman, on the other hand, was clothed in a simple dress more fitting for an older lady and a random hat. Her brown hair, somewhat askew to the left, bore evidence of a last-minute grooming.

Upon noticing, the maid tried to fix the mistress’s hair.

“If you could wait here, then,” the woman told the driver with a smile. “I’ll be right back.” She walked away, her shoes clicking.

The maid, standing on tip-toe, grasped empty air. “Madam, you have bed hair!”

“I don’t mind.”

“I do. Madam! Argh, darn it. Get back here!”

Switching to a ruder tone, the maid lifted her heavy, navy-blue skirt with both hands, revealing a pair of white cotton bloomers and striped socks, and followed the woman. The woman stopped at the entrance of the brick building, then linked hands with the maid, grinning.

“M-Madam,” the maid said, panting. “Lady Jacqueline, your bed hair. Um, why are you holding my hand?”

“Marion, promise me you’ll stop me if I’m about to make a stupid purchase.”

“Oh, I’ll stop you if you’re about to do *anything* stupid. Like I’ve always done. But you never listen.”

The woman looked to be in her mid or late twenties, while the maid was much younger, still in her late teens, but for some reason the latter was the one giving a lecture.

“You want to go on picnics when you know it’s going to rain. You see a dangerous bridge and you want to cross it.”

“It was fun, wasn’t it? It rained all of a sudden, so we had to take shelter. And luckily, the bridge didn’t collapse.”

“I caught a cold. Unlike you, Madam, I’m delicate.”

Instead of replying, Jacqueline made a funny face by puffing up her cheeks and opening her eyes wide. The maid laughed.

“Thank you for coming, Mrs. Signore.”

A portly man, who looked like a manager, appeared and bowed before Jacqueline. The door opened into a large hall. Holding hands with the maid, Jacqueline walked gracefully, letting the man lead the way.

The hall's high ceiling was filled with stained-glass windows, which turned the summer sun's rays into a variety of colors before falling on the floor. They were in the pride of Saubreme, one of the five most magnificent auction houses in Europe. The rows and rows of iron benches were already filled with men sitting erectly. It was a surprisingly large turnout at the time of year when summer holidays were almost over.

The man glanced at Jacqueline gleefully. "It's a great honor to have the Police Commissioner's wife at this month's auction. We have plenty of wonderful items today that I'm sure you will love. I hope you'll enjoy."

"I look forward to it." Jacqueline smiled. "My husband is also very interested in this kind of custom. He said that it's a pastime that requires a lot of education, and he hopes it will continue to develop."

"It is an honor to hear those words. Please enjoy your shopping." The man ushered her to a special seat in the front row.

"If I try to buy anything, you have to stop me, understand?" Jacqueline whispered to the young maid standing beside her.

"Do I really have to? He said there will be plenty of wonderful items."

"Yes, you *really* have to. We're running on a tight budget at the moment. Although my husband is a nobleman, he's already used up most of his inheritance. Not to mention the ridiculous amount spent in repairing the castle. He's barely making ends meet with his salary in the force." She sounded proud for some reason.

"O-Okay, I'll make sure to stop you," the maid agreed, pouting her lips.

The hall suddenly turned quiet. The auction was about to begin. Jacqueline, sitting with her back straight, looked around.

"Madam?"

"I sense eyes on me. A piercing glare. Is someone watching me?"

The maid also looked around. She thought she saw a young man look away, but there were so many people that she couldn't be sure.

Tilting her head, the maid said, "I don't see anyone."

The heavy scarlet curtains opened, and with a round of applause, the auction began.

Swords used by medieval royalty and beautiful art nouveau furniture were brought on the stage. The jewels were all so exquisite that there was no end to the gasps, murmurs, and the voices of people competitively bidding for them.

Jacqueline, however, had her chin in her hand, seemingly uninterested.

“Smile, Madam. Make it look like you’re interested.”

“Oh, right.”

“I bet the teacher reprimanded you when you were in school.”

“How did you know?”

“I can tell by looking at you. You’re the type to make her private tutor cry.”

“Marion. Look at that item.”

Jacqueline pointed to the stage with a look of interest. A creepy mask was brought forward, a far cry from the elegant antiques displayed earlier. It was black and looked hideously demonic.

Jacqueline giggled. “What a funny-looking mask.”

“You’re right.” The maid chuckled.

While the two ladies were elbowing each other, the price was announced. It was so expensive that they exchanged glances. No one wanted to bid on it.

“Any bids?”

Jacqueline raised one hand to nudge the laughing maid.

“Oh, Mrs. Signore has raised her hand!”

“...Huh?”

Jacqueline looked over her shoulder.

People all over the hall were looking at her. Jacqueline’s face was blank at first, then suddenly turned pale.

The price was not something the Signore family could afford at the moment. But she couldn’t find the guts to back down.

A man right behind her bid at a higher price. Jacqueline sank in her chair, relieved. No one else seemed to want the strange mask.

Some people have weird tastes, Jacqueline thought.

“Going once, going twice, sold to Mr. Grevil de Blois!”

Jacqueline looked back, shocked.

Light streaming in from the ceiling glinted off the familiar golden drill in shades of red, blue, green, yellow, orange. Grevil de Blois—the recent

talk of the town, the man whose photograph appeared in the newspapers, the famous police inspector whose hand was always shaken by men and young girls alike whenever he walked down the street—got up, smiled and nodded as he waved his hand, then took his seat.

Grevil noticed the police commissioner's wife staring at him with her brown eyes wide open. "I've always wanted that mask," he said curtly. "For once, I didn't come all the way to Saubreme to buy a doll. I came here to buy that mask. I can assure you that I didn't do this for you, Jacqueline."

"I-I see." Jacqueline believed him.

Jacqueline left the auction hall together with the other guests. The maid was gaping up at Grevil.

The man possessed handsome, elegant features, but the glossy golden hair pointed like a cannon ruined his overall appearance. Silver cufflinks, riding trousers. He was dressed impeccably, and if it weren't for his pointy hair, he would have looked like a prince out of a romance novel.

Jacqueline explained that he was the eldest son of Marquis de Blois and that they were childhood friends. As they walked along the pavement, Grevil tugged at Jacqueline's dress.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Would you like a cup of tea? I'm, uh, thirsty."

"You are?"

Grevil looked pale, like he had a stomach ache. "I feel like I'm in the desert all alone. I need a cup of tea right now. I feel like I'm dying."

"O-Okay. I think there's a café back here. Let's hurry."

Jacqueline moved away from the carriage and started running. Grevil, carrying the item he had just bought, followed with a scowl as frightening as the mask.

They arrived at a café located on the ground floor of a historic hotel. The interior was glamorous, with a high ceiling.

They ordered tea. The maid was standing beside them, listening to their conversation.

"Can you please make it quick? He's thirsty," Jacqueline told the waiter, then turned to Grevil.

Grevil was restlessly tapping his foot, his golden cannon swinging up and down with every tap. His elegant green eyes darted to the right, to the

left, and to the right again, then down to his mask.

Jacqueline watched him curiously for a while. Then she smiled. “Long time no see, Grevil.”

“Really?” Grevil looked up at the ceiling.

Jacqueline wondered why he was so fidgety. “Yeah. Long enough for childhood friends to drift apart. You never visited me once. Unlike the old days.”

“We saw each other at the beginning of summer. But I’m sure you already forgot.”

“I didn’t forget. But I wouldn’t count that as a reunion. After solving the Jeantan case, you immediately returned to the village. I really wanted to invite you over to my house. There are only so many people you can share your childhood stories with. And you’re a precious childhood friend of mine.”

“I’ve forgotten about my childhood,” Grevil replied hoarsely.

Suddenly he looked straight at Jacqueline. His cannon-shaped hair stopped shaking. His green eyes darkened.

Jacqueline stared back at him. Flustered, Grevil brought the black mask in front of his face to hide it. Green eyes peering out of the two holes watched Jacqueline intently. His expression was invisible.

“You don’t look well,” Grevil said.

“What?” Jacqueline gave a start. “How?”

Grevil sniffed audibly. “You always do stupid things when you’re down. You head out without fixing your hair, you get excited and trip. Worst case, you become a suspect in a strange murder case. It’s happened before. It happened just now, too.”

“Just now?”

“N-Never mind. Anyway, I’ve been watching your blunders very closely.”

“Oh. I don’t know much about you, though.”

“I’m well aware of that too.” Grevil chuckled dryly.

The tea arrived. The waiter graciously laid out the silverware and poured ruby tea into the cups.

“Did something happen?” Grevil asked through his mask, not even glancing at the tea.

“Hmm...”

“When we were young, you used to roll around and say whatever was on your mind. You made a racket about everything, bloomers and petticoat fully exposed.”

“So you *do* remember your childhood.”

“Yours, not mine.”

“And only the ridiculous ones too!”

“Talk to me. You don’t have to roll around. After all, you’re the wife of a police commissioner now.” He snorted. “You can’t do anything stupid. So just stay in your seat.”

“Grevil, you...” Jacqueline glared at Grevil and heaved a deep sigh. “Actually,” she began, “I enjoyed our vacation this year, but there was one thing bothering me.”

Every year, they usually went on a vacation with her husband and his family, but this year was different. Mr. Signore, the Police Commissioner, was busy dealing with the aftermath of the Jeantan case. His family had a young wife who was going into labor, a young boy who couldn’t return home from boarding school because he had done something wrong, and an old man who had caught a summer cold. Just as Jacqueline was about to decide to stay in Saubreme this year, Sophia, a classmate from her student days, called her for the first time in ages, inviting her to the Mediterranean with her.

“It’ll be fun, like being back in school. You should come and have a relaxing time,” Sophia said.

“Are you going alone?”

“No. Jupiter’s coming with me.”

“Jupiter?”

“I’ll introduce you. Oh, I’d love for you to meet him.”

Her husband encouraged her to go, so Jacqueline decided to go to a town on the Mediterranean coast.

Jacqueline met with Sophia and Jupiter at the Charles de Gilet station, where she found them snuggled up close to each other.

“Nice to meet you, Jupiter. I’m Jacqueline,” she said nervously. “Sophia and I have been friends since school.”

Jupiter returned the greeting with a short reply and a smile. He seemed a little shy, but he gradually opened up when they were on the train, perhaps

partly because of Jacqueline's outgoing personality.

"Where did you two meet?" Jacqueline asked.

"In Saubreme," Sophia replied. "It's your typical story. Our eyes met, and we fell in love."

"That's wonderful."

For a while they were engaged in casual conversation, but when they got closer to the town by the Mediterranean Sea, something strange happened to Jupiter. He had been eating the same food as Jacqueline and Sophia, taken from the same bag, but he was the only one who was in pain. The train was in an uproar. When they finally arrived at their destination, he was taken to the hospital, but he remained unconscious and passed away soon after.

Sophia was stunned and speechless, so Jacqueline spoke to the doctor instead. Apparently the change in the environment must have affected his health, and spoiled food made it worse. Their vacation got off to an unexpected start. After burying Jupiter on a hill overlooking the sea, a quiet summer with a sorrowful Sophia began.

"He passed away?" Grevil removed the mask from his face and leaned forward.

Jacqueline nodded sadly. "Yeah. It was all too sudden. I guess these things happen sometimes. He was too young."

"Did he get an autopsy?"

Bewildered, Jacqueline shook her head. "No. We buried him right away."

"Jacqueline, you're the wife of the police commissioner. You witnessed a suspicious death, yet you didn't bother learning about the cause?"

"Y-You're a famed police inspector, while I'm just a civilian. Besides, I just assumed the doctor was right."

"Hmm. So that's not what's bothering you, then. Continue."

"Okay."

Jacqueline resumed telling her story.

It was quiet inside the café. A gorgeous chandelier hung from high above. There weren't a lot of customers. A piano playing could be heard. Waiters silently marched down the aisles to serve guests.

Grevil took a sip of tea.

“After yellow Jupiter’s sudden death...”

“Yellow?”

“Yeah.”

The maid looked at Grevil’s pointy hair. “What an unusual hairdo.”

Every day Sophia cried as she watched the glittering Mediterranean Sea.

Jacqueline, swaying in her hammock, let out a sigh. Crying would not bring back the dead. She had to find a way to cheer up her friend.

So ten days later, she got Sophia dressed, put makeup on her, and took her out. There were supposed to be lots of fun things to do in the town—formal tea parties for the aristocracy, and casual parties held by the local youths on the seaside. Jacqueline was, by nature, an outgoing and sociable person, and Sophia, though depressed, was a bright and pretty girl, so when they showed up at a party, everyone welcomed them.

Towards the end of the summer, when Jacqueline saw Sophia’s brightening mood, giving her relief, her friend became interested in the recent spiritual craze among the noblewomen. The lady of a house she happened to visit had just called for a famous medium.

“She lost her only son in the Great War,” Sophia said. “So she’s been doing a lot of research.”

Jacqueline felt worried. She tried to give her opinion on the matter, but her friend wouldn’t listen.

“I don’t like the idea of séances,” Jacqueline said. “They’ll probably trick you into forking out a lot of money. How about you forget about all that and we go outside for a change, yeah?”

“No. If the medium is the real deal, I might be able to hear Jupiter’s voice.”

“Hear Jupiter’s voice? That’s not possible.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Sophia...”

One of the most popular pastimes of the nobility these days was holding séances. The medium would tell participants to sit around a round table and hold hands. The lights were then turned off and everyone waited in the dark for the medium to be possessed by the dead. Jacqueline didn’t believe in it at all, but Sophia urged her to join the séance.

The medium, an old woman, said that the lady of the house's dead son had possessed her. She then wrote down messages from him with a quill pen.

The contents of the message were things that anyone could have written, such as "Please cheer up, mom," and "The afterlife is quiet," but Sophia believed them completely. Ignoring Jacqueline's objections, she paid a lot of money and started organizing her own séances.

The medium held one every time she received money from Sophia. "Jupiter was murdered, and the culprit is among us," the woman said one day. She brought a yellow liquor, the same color as Jupiter, and had everyone present at the séance hold a glass. "Jupiter told me that the culprit's glass will turn cloudy from their sins," she said in a trembling voice, and slowly poured alcohol into everyone's glasses.

And then...

For some reason, the yellow liquor in Jacqueline's glass turned cloudy white in the blink of an eye. Everyone shuddered.

The medium's eyes widened. "I knew it!" she shouted triumphantly. "This woman killed the dog!"

Jacqueline quickly gathered herself. "I didn't!" she protested. "The sun spoiled the sandwiches a little. Besides, there could have been onions in it, which are toxic to dogs. Why would I kill my friend's beloved pet? Tell me."

"Only you know the reason. But Jupiter is telling me that you killed him." The medium pointed at Jacqueline and barked at her over and over.

"Dogs don't talk," Jacqueline hissed. "You're a fraud." She looked at her friend. "Right, Sophia? Sophia?"

Sophia glanced at the medium and Jacqueline, unsure. When Jacqueline saw the uneasy look on her face, she went limp.

She had been worrying about Sophia all summer, taking her out and about, but now it felt like she was being too nosy. The medium asked her if she could explain the liquor turning cloudy.

Jacqueline racked her brains. But she shook her head, unable to think of any explanation.

The other women present at the séance were whispering to each other. "Would the wife of the police commissioner really poison someone's dog?" one said.

“I just can’t believe it.”

When she realized that her husband’s reputation was at stake, Jacqueline’s vision went black.

Sofia was silent, hanging her head. She didn’t make eye contact with Jacqueline.

In the end, Jacqueline left Sophia and returned to Saubreme dejected. Memories of what should have been a fun summer were now tainted with bitterness.

“So there you have it. Grevil? Are you listening?”

Did I talk too much? Jacqueline wondered. *I think he’s asleep.*

She reached out and pulled the mask. Grevil’s face appeared, and it was blank.

He took a sip of tea. “A dog?” he sighed.

“Yes.”

“You were talking about a dog? Jupiter was a dog?”

“Yeah. I said so from the start, didn’t I?”

“No, you most certainly did not.”

“Really? Anyway, he was a nice little dog with yellow fur. He was a little shy, but he would make one little ‘woof’. He was cute.”

“It was a dog all along,” Grevil murmured. When he saw Jacqueline’s despondent look, he pulled himself together. “I-Is a dog dying really that big of a deal?”

“It is for the owner. I feel awful for leaving my friend without clearing up my name. Why would I poison a dog that she loved? I would never do something so horrible. Unfortunately, I can’t really explain what happened in that séance.”

“I see.”

Jacqueline’s shoulders sagged; speaking about what happened brought back the gloom. Grevil stared at her face for a while.

“I got nothing,” he mumbled.

“What?”

“No, it’s nothing. I have no idea why the yellow liquor turned cloudy white,” he mumbled. “Hmm. I should be a brilliant inspector, but I’m clueless. Hmm. I wonder why. What do I do? Argh, fine!”

Grevil got up his seat, swinging his golden cannon right, left, up, down, and strode off.

“Wh-Where are you going?” Jacqueline asked, surprised.

“I need to think.”

“Think? About what? Grevil?”

Jacqueline was getting worried since Grevil had not returned yet. As she wandered around looking for him, a waiter came up to her.

“If the lady’s looking for her pointy-headed companion, he’s in the telephone booth.”

“The telephone booth?” Jacqueline muttered curiously.

She headed toward the telephone room in the hotel lobby. Grevil was indeed in the small, square space, arguing with someone over the phone.

Wh-What is he doing?

Jacqueline approached slowly and observed him. She could hear a low, irritated voice.

“Stop preying on me!”

Prey?

He was apparently mad.

“You demon!” he snarled. “You never change. Always telling me to do random things for your amusement. What? A-Are you laughing?!”

Jacqueline looked puzzled. Grevil was glowering at the phone.

“What do you take your brother for?! You better stop making fun of me, or else. Just tell me already. Who’s in trouble?” He paused. “It’s Jacqueline. I said, Jac-que-line!”

He’s saying my name...

Grevil’s voice lowered so she could hear no more. Perplexed, Jacqueline returned to her seat to wait for him.

“He’s taking so long,” the maid said curiously.

A while later, Grevil came out of the telephone booth. Jacqueline thought he was coming back to the table, but for some reason he walked straight to the restroom.

Jacqueline and the maid exchanged looks.

“I wonder what happened,” Jacqueline said.

“Beats me.” The maid was pissed. “He got up from his seat in the middle of a conversation and started wandering around. You two may be

childhood friends, but it's still rude," she grumbled, fiddling with the bottom of her apron.

"He's probably just busy. He's a famed police inspector, after all. He solves a lot of difficult cases and he's well-respected. I don't want to bother him."

"But still..."

"It's okay, Marion."

"He's unbelievable."

"Oh, Marion."

Feeling bored, Jacqueline started playing with the small child of a family seated nearby, making funny faces at him. Not to be outdone, the child made funny faces back at her. Things were heating up.

A moment later, the door to the restroom opened. Grevil came out and headed back to the table. Jacqueline, absorbed in her competition, looked up when she heard his footsteps.

Grevil was staring at her in disbelief. "What's with that face? You never change. I thought you might have changed a little since becoming the police commissioner's wife, but that doesn't seem to be case. You're still the same jester."

"Grevil..." Jacqueline gave him the same look. Fixing her face, she said, "And you've changed too much. I mean, what on earth is up with your head?"

Grevil had gone into the restroom to fix his hair, turning it into two cannons that gaped open like the mouth of a ferocious crocodile. Jacqueline couldn't think of anything else to say.

Grevil spun on his heel. "Don't mind my hair."

"How could I not mind it? What's wrong? What happened in the last few minutes? I wasn't exactly paying attention."

"I need to use the phone a bit. Just wait here."

"Again?"

Jacqueline watched as he strode back into the telephone booth, his double cannons swinging. She ran after him.

Grevil was arguing with someone. "It's done, Victorique," he growled. "You persistent little twat. I say I will make it pointy, I will make it pointy. I say I'll add one, I will add one. That's how I live. Trust me. L-Lame? You

told me to do this! Victorique, my sister. I will get you for this, so you better watch your back.”

All Jacqueline could tell was that he was arguing with someone. Right now he was listening seriously. He exclaimed, nodded, and whispered something back.

It looked like the call would take a while, so Jacqueline moved away from the booth and returned to the table. As she asked for more tea, Grevil came back glumly. He looked like a different person altogether.

“You must be very busy,” Jacqueline said worriedly. “You don’t look so good. There must be something serious going on.”

“You don’t have to worry about it.”

“R-Really?”

“Did you ask for a refill?”

“I did. I asked for another cup of tea. Would you like a refill too?”

“I’m in the mood for a drink. Garçon!” he called with an affected gesture. “A bottle of Pernod and two glasses. And give me some water.”

“Drinking this early in the day?” Jacqueline said. “Actually, since when did you start drinking?”

“Hmm...”

Grevil was deep in thought, silently fiddling with his mask.

The radiant evening sun was shining through the café’s glass windows. Suntanned men and women on their way home from vacation hurried past. Summer’s end was fast approaching.

Jacqueline watched as the garçon brought a bottle of liquor, two glasses, and a glass of water. She noticed that the bottle of liquor looked familiar.

“This drink,” she gasped.

“Yeah.” Grevil nodded. “This is the yellow liquor that the medium used, right?”

“Yes. I recognize this label. Yellow liqueur. Only my glass turned cloudy.”

“Let’s pour it into this glass first.”

Grevil poured Pernod into one of the glasses, filling it to the brim. Jacqueline’s lips quivered from the memory of that day.

“It’s definitely this. A beautiful yellow, just like Jupiter.”

“As for the other glass.”

Grevil filled another glass with a tiny amount of water that the eye wouldn't be able to see. Then he poured Pernod into it.

Jacqueline and the maid gasped.

“So this is how she did it,” Jacqueline breathed.

“That’s right.” Grevil nodded. His double cannon rocked up and down. “The medium put just a little bit of water in your glass beforehand. This liquor has the property of turning cloudy when mixed with water. Of course, it will be difficult to prove that this is what happened then, but you can at least offer Sophia an explanation with this. Now the question: who will Sophia believe?”

“That will depend on how strong our relationship is. If she sees me as a trustworthy friend.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Grevil said. Then with a hint of sarcasm, he mumbled, “You’re the type to care about your friends, after all.” He gulped down the cloudy liquor and stood up. “I have to go.”

“What, already?” Jacqueline found his restlessness astonishing.

Grevil turned around with an odd expression on his face, somewhat sad and childlike. The double cannons on his head stirred.

“I have a lot on my plate at the moment. I was not expecting to run into you at the auction. You just happened to be sitting right in front of me. I absolutely did not wander up to you and then suddenly found myself sitting right behind you. I swear.”

“O-Okay...”

Jacqueline believed him.

As Grevil hurried away, the maid said, “He’s so restless.”

“Is he?” Jacqueline wondered.

The evening sun dyed the city orange. Through the glass she could see Grevil’s slender figure moving away quickly. Soon he slipped into the crowd of black carriages, automobiles, and passersby, and disappeared behind a brick building. The wind rustled the hem of a lady’s dress and the feather on her hat.

“He *does* look busy,” Jacqueline said.

“And he has a weird hairdo.” The maid chuckled.

Jacqueline, for some reason, did not laugh with her. “I’ve known him since I was a child. He used to be an eye-catcher,” she said with a wistful

smile. "He's handsome and slim. Always so quiet and collected. I used to get so nervous in front of him that I couldn't speak at all."

"Really? You talked a lot just now."

"Maybe it's a response from my childhood. Besides, I grew up."

Jacqueline snickered. "You're pretty, Marion, so it might be difficult for you to picture the me from back then. I was a dark-skinned, skinny, unattractive girl. I was so shy that the best I could do was admire him from afar. I cherished the memory of the occasional conversation I had with Grevil, even if it was just a word or two. I thought our eyes met frequently, but it could've just been my imagination, so I'd get embarrassed at myself."

"I see," Marion muttered. "Why didn't you just stare back at him every time your eyes met?"

"I couldn't do that. Ugly girls are cowards. They're too frightened to approach a charming boy. But Grevil was very kind to me when I approached him. So even though I was nervous, I have a lot of good memories of those days."

"Did he sport the pointy hair back then?"

"He did not."

"How did that happen, then?"

"I have no clue. I think he started fixing it like that when he got older. And I'm not sure if it's something he wants to talk about. But pointy-haired or not, Grevil is still Grevil."

Jacqueline played with the yellow Pernod for a while, then drank it in one gulp.

"He has always been so nice. He helped me today, too. I kept getting drawn to his pretty face, so I didn't realize it back then. Only when I grew older that I understood. Just goes to show that the passage of time and growing older isn't always a bad thing. Though back then, I wished I stayed a child forever." Jacqueline smiled.

The sun was setting outside. They exited the café and walked down the cobblestone street to their waiting carriage. Jacqueline looked out the window, watching the scenery.

"I wonder if I'll see him again," she murmured.

Summer's end. Dazzling sunlight beamed down on the streets of Saubreme. A pair of church spires glistened golden in the setting sun.

Epilogue

The long, seemingly-endless summer break of Victorique and Kazuya, the only students left in St. Marguerite Academy, was finally coming to an end.

At the end of summer, Victorique's brother, Grevil de Blois, who had left for the capital Saubreme, ended up with an additional golden drill and a broken heart. The moment he returned to St. Marguerite Academy, the next story began to unfold.

It's the last day of summer vacation. As usual, Kazuya is searching for Victorique, but finds himself alone in the empty candy house. Inspector Blois tells him that Victorique has left for Beelzebub's Skull, a perilous monastery on the Baltic Sea coast. Kazuya hops on a train to pick up his friend, stuffing her suitcase full of frills, lace, books, and candies.

And so begins another dangerous adventure for Victorique and Kazuya. But that is a story for another time.

GosickS - Volume 02

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